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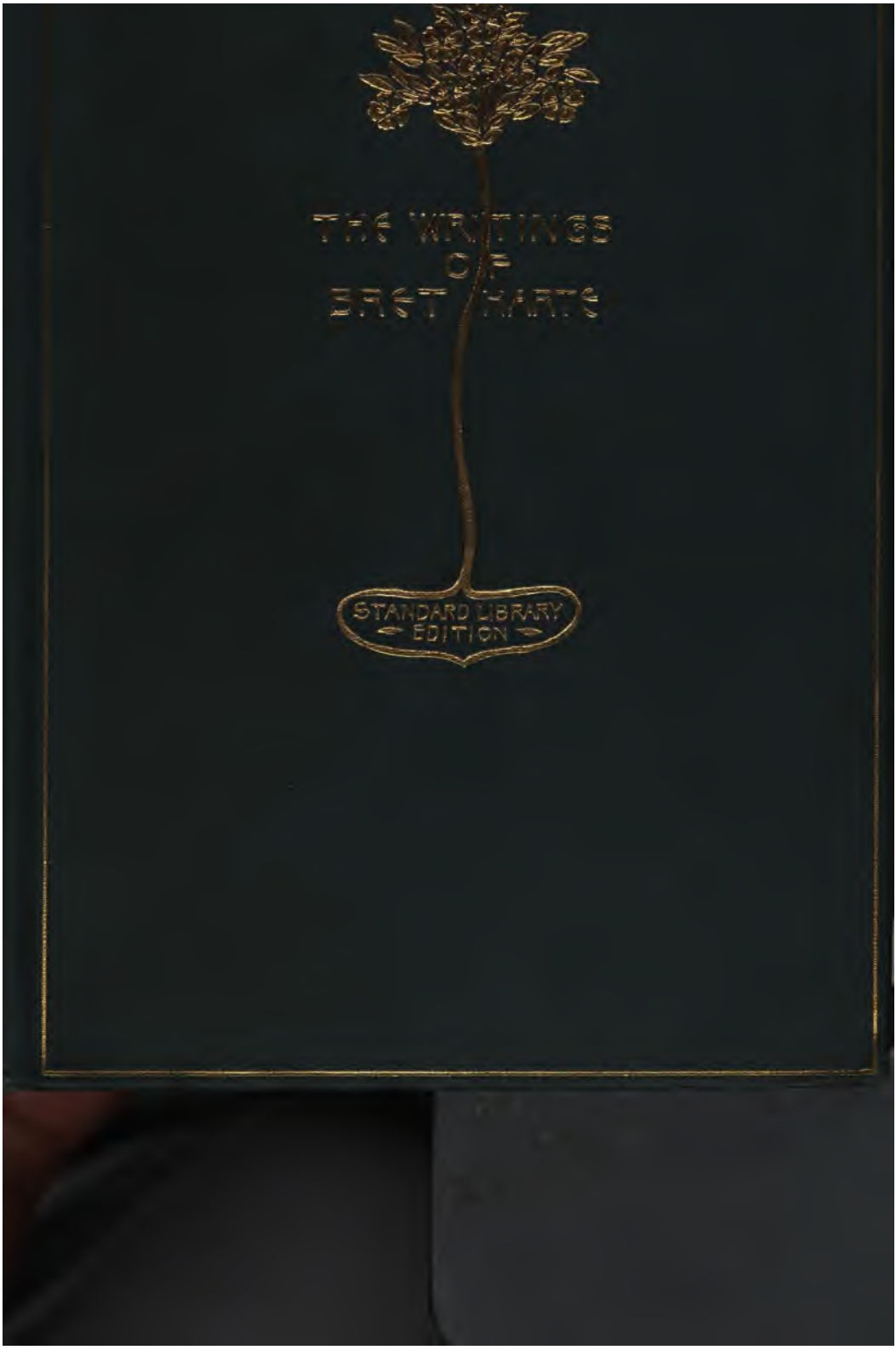
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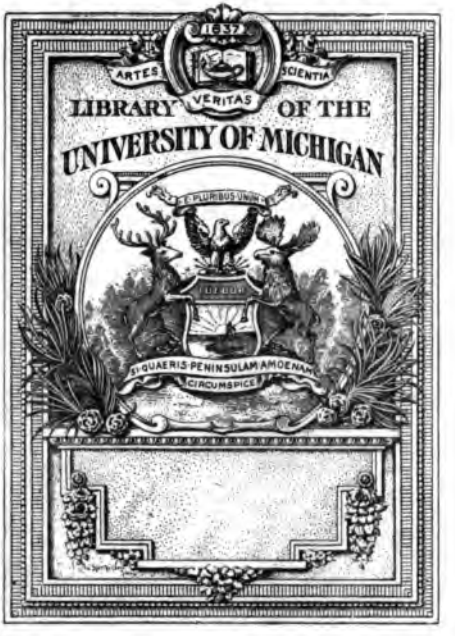
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THE WRITINGS OF

BRET HARTE

WITH INTRODUCTIONS, GLOSSARY, AND INDEXES

ILLUSTRATED BY PHOTOGRAVURES

VOLUME XV

Mau

The stillness of death followed the echoless report

The Writings of Bret Harte

STANDARD LIBRARY EDITION

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

THREE PARTNERS

AND OTHER TALES

BY

BRET HARTE

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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THREE PARTNERS AND OTHER TALES

THREE PARTNERS

PROLOGUE

THE sun was going down on the Black Spur Range. The red light it had kindled there was still eating its way along the serried crest, showing through gaps in the ranks of pines, etching out the interstices of broken boughs, fading away and then flashing suddenly out again like sparks in burnt-up paper. Then the night wind swept down the whole mountain side, and began its usual struggle with the shadows upclimbing from the valley, only to lose itself in the end and be absorbed in the all-conquering darkness. Yet for some time the pines on the long slope of Heavy Tree Hill murmured and protested with swaying arms; but as the shadows stole upwards, and cabin after cabin and tunnel after tunnel were swallowed up, a complete silence followed. Only the sky remained visible — a vast concave mirror of dull steel, in which the stars did not seem to be set, but only reflected.

A single cabin door on the crest of Heavy Tree Hill had remained open to the wind and darkness. Then it was slowly shut by an invisible figure, afterwards revealed by the embers of the fire it was stirring. At first only this figure brooding over the hearth was shown, but as the flames leaped up, two other figures could be seen sitting motionless before it. When the door was shut, they acknowledged that interruption by slightly changing their position; the one who had risen to shut the door sank

back into an invisible seat, but the attitude of each man was one of profound reflection or reserve, and apparently upon some common subject which made them respect each other's silence. However, this was at last broken by a laugh. It was a boyish laugh, and came from the youngest of the party. The two others turned their profiles and glanced inquiringly towards him, but did not speak.

"I was thinking," he began in apologetic explanation, "how mighty queer it was that while we were working like niggers on grub wages, without the ghost of a chance of making a strike, how we used to sit here, night after night, and flapdoodle and speculate about what we 'd do if we ever *did* make one; and now, Great Scott! that we *have* made it, and are just wallowing in gold, here we are sitting as glum and silent as if we 'd had a washout! Why, Lord! I remember one night — not so long ago, either — that you two quarreled over the swell hotel you were going to stop at in 'Frisco, and whether you would n't strike straight out for London and Rome and Paris, or go away to Japan and China and round by India and the Red Sea."

"No, we did n't *quarrel* over it," said one of the figures gently; "there was only a little discussion."

"Yes, but you did, though," returned the young fellow mischievously, "and you told Stacy, there, that we 'd better learn something of the world before we tried to buy it or even hire it, and that it was just as well to get the hayseed out of our hair and the slumgullion off our boots before we mixed in polite society."

"Well, I don't see what 's the matter with that sentiment now," returned the second speaker good-humoredly; "only," he added gravely, "we did n't quarrel — God forbid!"

There was something in the speaker's tone which seemed to touch a common chord in their natures, and this was

voiced by Barker with sudden and almost pathetic earnestness. "I tell you what, boys, we ought to swear here to-night to always stand by each other — in luck and out of it! We ought to hold ourselves always at each other's call. We ought to have a kind of password or signal, you know, by which we could summon each other at any time from any quarter of the globe!"

"Come off the roof, Barker," murmured Stacy, without lifting his eyes from the fire. But Demorest smiled and glanced tolerantly at the younger man.

"Yes, but look here, Stacy," continued Barker, "comrades like us, in the old days, used to do that in times of trouble and adventures. Why should n't we do it in our luck?"

"There 's a good deal in that, Barker boy," said Demorest, "though, as a general thing, passwords butter no parsnips, and the ordinary every-day single yelp from a wolf brings the whole pack together for business about as quick as a password. But you cling to that sentiment, and put it away with your gold-dust in your belt."

"What I like about Barker is his commodiousness," said Stacy. "Here he is, the only man among us that has his future fixed and his preëmption lines laid out and registered. He 's already got a girl that he 's going to marry and settle down with on the strength of his luck. And I 'd like to know what Kitty Carter, when she 's Mrs. Barker, would say to her husband being signaled for from Asia or Africa. I don't seem to see her tumbling to any password. And when he and she go into a new partnership, I reckon she 'll let the old one slide."

"That 's just where you 're wrong!" said Barker, with quickly rising color. "She 's the sweetest girl in the world, and she 'd be sure to understand our feelings. Why, she thinks everything of you two; she was just eager for you to get this claim, which has put us where we are, when I

held back, and if it had n't been for her, by Jove! we would n't have had it."

"That was only because she cared for *you*," returned Stacy, with a half-yawn; "and now that you 've got *your* share she is n't going to take a breathless interest in *us*. And, by the way, I 'd rather *you 'd* remind us that we owe our luck to her than that *she* should ever remind *you* of it."

"What do you mean?" said Barker quickly.

But Demorest here rose lazily, and, throwing a gigantic shadow on the wall, stood between the two with his back to the fire. "He means," he said slowly, "that you 're talking rot, and so is he. However, as yours comes from the heart and his from the head, I prefer yours. But you 're both making me tired. Let 's have a fresh deal."

Nobody ever dreamed of contradicting Demorest. Nevertheless, Barker persisted eagerly: "But is n't it better for us to look at this cheerfully and happily all round? There 's nothing criminal in our having made a strike! It seems to me, boys, that of all ways of making money it 's the squarest and most level; nobody is the poorer for it; our luck brings no misfortune to others. The gold was put there ages ago for anybody to find; we found it. It has n't been tarnished by man's touch before. I don't know how it strikes you, boys, but it seems to me that of all gifts that are going it is the straightest. For whether we deserve it or not, it comes to us first-hand — from God!"

The two men glanced quickly at the speaker, whose face flushed and then smiled embarrassedly as if ashamed of the enthusiasm into which he had been betrayed. But Demorest did not smile, and Stacy's eyes shone in the firelight as he said languidly, "I never heard that prospecting was a religious occupation before. But I should n't wonder if you 're right, Barker boy. So let 's liquor up."

Nevertheless he did not move, nor did the others. The fire leaped higher, bringing out the rude rafters and sternly

economic details of the rough cabin, and making the occupants in their seats before the fire look gigantic by contrast.

"Who shut the door?" said Demorest after a pause.

"I did," said Barker. "I reckoned it was getting cold."

"Better open it again, now that the fire's blazing. It will light the way, if any of the men from below want to drop in this evening."

Stacy stared at his companion. "I thought that it was understood that we were giving them that dinner at Boomville to-morrow night, so that we might have the last evening here by ourselves in peace and quietness?"

"Yes, but if any one *did* want to come, it would seem churlish to shut him out," said Demorest.

"I reckon you're feeling very much as I am," said Stacy, "that this good fortune is rather crowding to us three alone. For myself, I know," he continued, with a backward glance towards a blanketed, covered pile in the corner of the cabin, "that I feel rather oppressed by — by — its specific gravity, I calculate — and sort of crampy and twitchy in the legs, as if I ought to 'lite' out and do something, and yet it holds me here. All the same, I doubt if anybody will come up — except from curiosity. Our luck has made them rather sore down the hill, for all they're coming to the dinner to-morrow."

"That's only human nature," said Demorest.

"But," said Barker eagerly, "what does it mean? Why, only this afternoon, when I was passing the 'Old Kentuck' tunnel, where those Marshalls have been grubbing along for four years without making a single strike, I felt ashamed to look at them, and as they barely nodded to me, I slinked by as if I had done them an injury. I don't understand it."

"It somehow does not seem to square with this 'gift of God' idea of yours, does it?" said Stacy. "But we'll open the door and give them a show."

As he did so it seemed as if the night were their only guest, and had been waiting on the threshold to now enter bodily and pervade all things with its presence. With that cool, fragrant inflow of air they breathed freely. The red edge had gone from Black Spur, but it was even more clearly defined against the sky in its towering blackness. The sky itself had grown lighter, although the stars still seemed mere reflections of the solitary pin-points of light scattered along the concave valley below. Mingling with the cooler, restful air of the summit, yet penetratingly distinct from it, arose the stimulating breath of the pines below, still hot and panting from the day-long sun. The silence was intense. The far-off barking of a dog on the invisible river-bar nearly a mile beneath them came to them like a sound in a dream. They had risen, and, standing in the doorway, by common consent turned their faces to the east. It was the frequent attitude of the home-remembering miner, and it gave him the crowning glory of the view. For, beyond the pine-hearsed summits, rarely seen except against the evening sky, lay a thin, white cloud like a dropped portion of the Milky Way. Faint with an indescribable pallor, remote yet distinct enough to assert itself above and beyond all surrounding objects, it was always there. It was the snow-line of the Sierras.

They turned away and silently reseated themselves, the same thought in the mind of each. Here was something they could not take away, something to be left forever and irretrievably behind, — left with the healthy life they had been leading, the cheerful endeavor, the undying hopefulness which it had fostered and blessed. Was what they *were* taking away worth it? And oddly enough, frank and outspoken as they had always been to each other, that common thought remained unuttered. Even Barker was silent; perhaps he was also thinking of Kitty.

Suddenly two figures appeared in the very doorway of

the cabin. The effect was startling upon the partners, who had only just reseated themselves, and for a moment they had forgotten that the narrow band of light which shot forth from the open door rendered the darkness on either side of it more impenetrable, and that out of this darkness, although themselves guided by the light, the figures had just emerged. Yet one was familiar enough. It was the Hill drunkard, Dick Hall, or, as he was called, "Whiskey Dick," or, indicated still more succinctly by the Hill humorists, "Alky Hall."

Everybody had seen that sodden, puffy, but good-humored face; everybody had felt the fiery exhalations of that enormous red beard, which always seemed to be kept in a state of moist, unkempt luxuriance by liquor; everybody knew the absurd dignity of manner and attempted precision of statement with which he was wont to disguise his frequent excesses. Very few, however, knew, or cared to know, the pathetic weariness and chilling horror that sometimes looked out of those bloodshot eyes.

He was evidently equally unprepared for the three silent seated figures before the door, and for a moment looked at them blankly with the doubts of a frequently deceived perception. Was he sure that they were quite real? He had not dared to look at his companion for verification, but smiled vaguely.

"Good-evening," said Demorest pleasantly.

Whiskey Dick's face brightened. "Good-evenin', good-evenin' yourselves, boys—and see how you like it! Lemme interdrush my ole frien' William J. Steptoe, of Red Gulch. Stepsho — Steptoe—is shtay—ish stay"— He stopped, hiccupped, waved his hand gravely, and with an air of reproachful dignity concluded, "sojourning for the present on the Bar. We wish to offer our congrashulashen and felish — felish" — He paused again, and, leaning against the door-post, added severely, "—itations."

His companion, however, laughed coarsely, and pushing past Dick, entered the cabin. He was a short, powerful man, with a closely cropped crust of beard and hair that seemed to adhere to his round head like moss or lichen. He cast a glance — furtive rather than curious — around the cabin, and said, with a familiarity that had not even good humor to excuse it, "So you 're the gay galoots who 've made the big strike? Thought I 'd meander up the Hill with this old bloat Alky, and drop in to see the show. And here you are, feeling your oats, eh? and not caring any particular G—d d—n if school keeps or not."

"Show Mr. Steptoe — the whiskey," said Demorest to Stacy. Then quietly addressing Dick, but ignoring Steptoe as completely as Steptoe had ignored his unfortunate companion, he said, "You quite startled us at first. We did not see you come up the trail."

"No. We came up the back trail to please Steptoe, who wanted to see round the cabin," said Dick, glancing nervously yet with a forced indifference towards the whiskey which Stacy was offering to the stranger.

"What yer gettin' off there?" said Steptoe, facing Dick almost brutally. "You know your tangled legs would n't take you straight up the trail, and you had to make a circumbendibus. Gosh! if you had n't scented this licker at the top, you 'd have never found it."

"No matter! I 'm glad you *did* find it, Dick," said Demorest, "and I hope you 'll find the liquor good enough to pay you for the trouble."

Barker stared at Demorest. This extraordinary tolerance of the drunkard was something new in his partner. But at a glance from Demorest he led Dick to the demijohn and tin cup which stood on a table in the corner. And in another moment Dick had forgotten his companion's rudeness.

Demorest remained by the door, looking out into the darkness.

"Well," said Steptoe, putting down his emptied cup, "trot out your strike. I reckon our eyes are strong enough to bear it now." Stacy drew the blanket from the vague pile that stood in the corner, and discovered a deep tin prospecting-pan. It was heaped with several large fragments of quartz. At first the marble whiteness of the quartz and the glittering crystals of mica in its veins were the most noticeable, but as they drew closer they could see the dull yellow of gold filling the decomposed and honeycombed portion of the rock as if still liquid and molten. The eyes of the party sparkled like the mica — even those of Barker and Stacy, who were already familiar with the treasure.

"Which is the richest chunk?" asked Steptoe in a thickening voice.

Stacy pointed it out.

"Why, it's smaller than the others."

"Heft it in your hand," said Barker with boyish enthusiasm.

The short, thick fingers of Steptoe grasped it with a certain aquiline suggestion; his whole arm strained over it until his face grew purple, but he could not lift it.

"Thar useter be a little game in the 'Frisco Mint," said Dick, restored to fluency by his liquor, "when thar war ladies visiting it, and that was to offer to give 'em any of those little boxes of gold coin that contained five thousand dollars, ef they would kindly lift it from the counter and take it away! It was n't no bigger than one of these chunks; but Jiminy! you oughter have seed them gals grip and heave on it, and then hev to give it up! You see they did n't know anything about the paci— (hic) the speshif" — He stopped with great dignity, and added with painful precision, "the specific gravity of gold."

"Dry up!" said Steptoe roughly. Then turning to Stacy he said abruptly, "But where 's the rest of it? You 've got more than that."

"We sent it to Boomville this morning. You see we 've sold out our claim to a company who take it up to-morrow, and put up a mill and stamps. In fact, it 's under their charge now. They 've got a gang of men on the claim already."

"And what mout ye hev got for it, if it 's a fair question?" said Steptoe, with a forced smile.

Stacy smiled also. "I don't know that it 's a business question," he said.

"Five hundred thousand dollars," said Demorest abruptly from the doorway, "and a treble interest."

The eyes of the two men met. There was no mistaking the dull fire of envy in Steptoe's glance, but Demorest received it with a certain cold curiosity, and turned away as the sound of arriving voices came from without.

"Five hundred thousand 's a big figger," said Steptoe, with a coarse laugh, "and I don't wonder it makes you feel so d—d sassy. But it *was* a fair question."

Unfortunately it here occurred to the whiskey-stimulated brain of Dick that the friend he had introduced was being treated with scant courtesy, and he forgot his own treatment by Steptoe. Leaning against the wall, he waved a dignified rebuke. "I 'm sashified my ole frien' is akshuated by only businesh principles." He paused, recollected himself, and added with great precision: "When I say he himself has a valuable claim in Red Gulch, and to my shertain knowledge has received offers — I have said enough."

The laugh that broke from Stacy and Barker, to whom the infelicitous reputation of Red Gulch was notorious, did not allay Steptoe's irritation. He darted a vindictive glance at the unfortunate Dick, but joined in the laugh. "And what was ye goin' to do with that?" he said, pointing to the treasure.

"Oh, we 're taking that with us. There 's a chunk for each of us as a memento. We cast lots for the choice, and

Demorest won, — that one which you could n't lift with one hand, you know," said Stacy.

"Oh, could n't I? I reckon you ain't goin' to give me the same chance that they did at the Mint, eh?"

Although the remark was accompanied with his usual coarse, familiar laugh, there was a look in his eye so inconsequent in its significance that Stacy would have made some reply, but at this moment Demorest reëntered the cabin, ushering in a half dozen miners from the Bar below. They were, although youngish men, some of the older locators in the vicinity, yet, through years of seclusion and uneventful labors, they had acquired a certain childish simplicity of thought and manner that was alternately amusing and pathetic. They had never intruded upon the reserve of the three partners of Heavy Tree Hill before; nothing but an infantine curiosity, a shy recognition of the partners' courtesy in inviting them with the whole population of Heavy Tree to the dinner the next day, and the never-to-be-resisted temptation of an evening of "free liquor" and forgetfulness of the past had brought them there now. Among them, and yet not of them, was a young man who, although speaking English without accent, was distinctly of a different nationality and race. This, with a certain neatness of dress and artificial suavity of address, had gained him the nickname of "the Count" and "Frenchy," although he was really of Flemish extraction. He was the Union Ditch Company's agent on the Bar, by virtue of his knowledge of languages.

Barker uttered an exclamation of pleasure when he saw him. Himself the incarnation of naturalness, he had always secretly admired this young foreigner, with his lacquered smoothness, although a vague consciousness that neither Stacy nor Demorest shared his feelings had restricted their acquaintance. Nevertheless, he was proud now to see the bow with which Paul Van Loo entered the cabin as if it were a drawing-room, and perhaps did not reflect upon that

want of real feeling in an act which made the others uncomfortable.

The slight awkwardness their entrance produced, however, was quickly forgotten when the blanket was again lifted from the pan of treasure. Singularly enough, too, the same feverish light came into the eyes of each as they all gathered around this yellow shrine. Even the polite Paul rudely elbowed his way between the others, though his artificial "Pardon" seemed to Barker to condone this act of brutal instinct. But it was more instructive to observe the manner in which the older locators received this confirmation of the fickle Fortune that had overlooked their weary labors and years of waiting to lavish her favors on the new and inexperienced amateurs. Yet as they turned their dazzled eyes upon the three partners there was no envy or malice in their depths, no reproach on their lips, no insincerity in their wondering satisfaction. Rather there was a touching, almost childlike resumption of hope as they gazed at this conclusive evidence of Nature's bounty. The gold had been there — *they* had only missed it! And if there, more could be found! Was it not a proof of the richness of Heavy Tree Hill? So strongly was this reflected on their faces that a casual observer, contrasting them with the thoughtful countenances of the real owners, would have thought them the lucky ones. It touched Barker's quick sympathies, it puzzled Stacy, it made Demorest more serious, it aroused Steptoe's active contempt. Whiskey Dick alone remained stolid and impassive in a desperate attempt to pull himself once more together. Eventually he succeeded, even to the ambitious achievement of mounting a chair and lifting his tin cup with a dangerously unsteady hand, which did not, however, affect his precision of utterance, and said: —

"Order, gentlemen! We 'll drink success to — to" —

"The next strike!" said Barker, leaping impetuously on another chair and beaming upon the old locators — "and may it come to those who have so long deserved it!"

His sincere and generous enthusiasm seemed to break the spell of silence that had fallen upon them. Other toasts quickly followed. In the general good feeling Barker attached himself to Van Loo with his usual boyish effusion, and in a burst of confidence imparted the secret of his engagement to Kitty Carter. Van Loo listened with polite attention, formal congratulations, but inscrutable eyes, that occasionally wandered to Stacy and again to the treasure. A slight chill of disappointment came over Barker's quick sensitiveness. Perhaps his enthusiasm had bored this superior man of the world. Perhaps his confidences were in bad taste! With a new sense of his inexperience he turned sadly away. Van Loo took that opportunity to approach Stacy.

"What 's all this I hear of Barker being engaged to Miss Carter?" he said, with a faintly superior smile. "Is it really true?"

"Yes. Why should n't it be?" returned Stacy bluntly.

Van Loo was instantly deprecating and smiling. "Why not, of course? But is n't it sudden?"

"They have known each other ever since he 's been on Heavy Tree Hill," responded Stacy.

"Ah, yes! True," said Van Loo. "But now" —

"Well — he 's got money enough to marry, and he 's going to marry."

"Rather young, is n't he?" said Van Loo, still deprecatingly. "And she 's got nothing. Used to wait on the table at her father's hotel in Boomville, did n't she?"

"Yes. What of that? We all know it."

"Of course. It 's an excellent thing for her — and her father. He 'll have a rich son-in-law. About two hundred thousand is his share, is n't it? I suppose old Carter is delighted?"

Stacy had thought this before, but did not care to have it corroborated by this superfine young foreigner. "And I

don't reckon that Barker is offended if he is," he said curtly as he turned away. Nevertheless, he felt irritated that one of the three superior partners of Heavy Tree Hill should be thought a dupe.

Suddenly the conversation dropped, the laughter ceased. Every one turned round, and, by a common instinct, looked towards the door. From the obscurity of the hill slope below came a wonderful tenor voice, modulated by distance and spiritualized by the darkness : —

> "When at some future day
> I shall be far away,
> Thou wilt be weeping,
> Thy lone watch keeping."

The men looked at one another. "That 's Jack Hamlin," they said. "What 's he doing here ? "

"The wolves are gathering around fresh meat," said Steptoe, with his coarse laugh and a glance at the treasure. "Did n't ye know he came over from Red Dog yesterday ? "

"Well, give Jack a fair show and his own game," said one of the old locators, "and he 'd clean out that pile afore sunrise."

"And lose it next day," added another.

"But never turn a hair or change a muscle in either case," said a third. "Lord ! I 've heard him sing away just like that when he 's been leaving the board with five thousand dollars in his pocket, or going away stripped of his last red cent."

Van Loo, who had been listening with a peculiar smile, here said in his most deprecating manner, "Yes, but did you never consider the influence that such a man has on the hard-working tunnelmen, who are ready to gamble their whole week's earnings to him ? Perhaps not. But I know the difficulties of getting the Ditch rates from these men when he has been in camp."

He glanced around him with some importance, but only

a laugh followed his speech. "Come, Frenchy," said an old locator, "you only say that because your little brother wanted to play with Jack like a grown man, and when Jack ordered him off the board and he became sassy, Jack scooted him outer the saloon."

Van Loo's face reddened with an anger that had the apparent effect of removing every trace of his former polished repose, and leaving only a hard outline beneath. At which Demorest interfered: —

"I can't say that I see much difference in gambling by putting money into a hole in the ground and expecting to take more from it than by putting it on a card for the same purpose."

Here the ravishing tenor voice, which had been approaching, ceased, and was succeeded by a heart-breaking and equally melodious whistling to finish the bar of the singer's song. And the next moment Jack Hamlin appeared in the doorway.

Whatever was his present financial condition, in perfect self-possession and charming *sang-froid* he fully bore out his previous description. He was as clean and refreshing looking as a madroño-tree in the dust-blown forest. An odor of scented soap and freshly ironed linen was wafted from him; there was scarcely a crease in his white waistcoat, nor a speck upon his varnished shoes. He might have been an auditor of the previous conversation, so quickly and completely did he seem to take in the whole situation at a glance. Perhaps there was an extra tilt to his black-ribboned Panama hat, and a certain dancing devilry in his brown eyes — which might also have been an answer to adverse criticism.

"When I, his truth to prove, would trifle with my love," he warbled in general continuance from the doorway. Then dropping cheerfully into speech, he added, "Well, boys, I am here to welcome the little stranger, and to trust that the

family are doing as well as can be expected. Ah! there it is! Bless it!" he went on, walking leisurely to the treasure. "Triplets, too! — and plump at that. Have you had 'em weighed?"

Frankness was an essential quality of Heavy Tree Hill. "We were just saying, Jack," said an old locator, "that, giving you a fair show and your own game, you could manage to get away with that pile before daybreak."

"And I'm just thinking," said Jack cheerfully, "that there were some of you here that could do that without any such useless preliminary." His brown eyes rested for a moment on Steptoe, but turning quite abruptly to Van Loo, he held out his hand. Startled and embarrassed before the others, the young man at last advanced his, when Jack coolly put his own, as if forgetfully, in his pocket. "I thought you might like to know what that little brother of yours is doing," he said to Van Loo, yet looking at Steptoe. "I found him wandering about the Hill here quite drunk."

"I have repeatedly warned him" — began Van Loo, reddening.

"Against bad company — I know," suggested Jack gayly; "yet in spite of all that, I think he owes some of his liquor to Steptoe yonder."

"I never supposed the fool would get drunk over a glass of whiskey offered in fun," said Steptoe harshly, yet evidently quite as much disconcerted as angry.

"The trouble with Steptoe," said Hamlin, thoughtfully spanning his slim waist with both hands as he looked down at his polished shoes, "is that he has such a soft-hearted liking for all weaknesses. Always wanting to protect chaps that can't look after themselves, whether it's Whiskey Dick there when he has a pull on, or some nigger when he's made a little strike, or that straying lamb of Van Loo's when he's puppy drunk. But you're wrong

about me, boys. You can't draw me in any game to-night. This is one of my nights off, which I devote exclusively to contemplation and song. But," he added, suddenly turning to his three hosts with a bewildering and fascinating change of expression, "I could n't resist coming up here to see you and your pile, even if I never saw the one or the other before, and am not likely to see either again. I believe in luck! And it comes a mighty sight oftener than a fellow thinks it does. But it does n't come to stay. So I 'd advise you to keep your eyes skinned, and hang on to it while it 's with you, like grim death. So long!"

Resisting all attempts of his hosts — who had apparently fallen as suddenly as unaccountably under the magic of his manner — to detain him longer, he stepped lightly away, his voice presently rising again in melody as he descended the hill. Nor was it at all remarkable that the others, apparently drawn by the same inevitable magnetism, were impelled to follow him, naturally joining their voices with his, leaving Steptoe and Van Loo so markedly behind them alone that they were compelled at last in sheer embarrassment to close up the rear of the procession. In another moment the cabin and the three partners again relapsed into the peace and quiet of the night. With the dying away of the last voices on the hillside the old solitude reasserted itself.

But since the irruption of the strangers they had lost their former sluggish contemplation, and now busied themselves in preparation for their early departure from the cabin the next morning. They had arranged to spend the following day and night at Boomville and Carter's Hotel, where they were to give their farewell dinner to Heavy Tree Hill. They talked but little together: since the rebuff his enthusiastic confidences had received from Van Loo, Barker had been grave and thoughtful, and Stacy, with the irritating recollection of Van Loo's criticisms in

his mind, had refrained from his usual rallying of Barker. Oddly enough, they spoke chiefly of Jack Hamlin, — till then personally a stranger to them, on account of his infelix reputation, — and even the critical Demorest expressed a wish they had known him before. "But you never know the real value of anything until you're quitting it or it's quitting you," he added sententiously.

Barker and Stacy both stared at their companion. It was unlike Demorest to regret anything — particularly a mere social diversion.

"They say," remarked Stacy, "that if you had known Jack Hamlin earlier and professionally, a great deal of real value would have quitted you before he did."

"Don't repeat that rot flung out by men who have played Jack's game and lost," returned Demorest derisively. "I'd rather trust him than" — He stopped, glanced at the meditative Barker, and then concluded abruptly, "the whole caboodle of his critics."

They were silent for a few moments, and then seemed to have fallen into their former dreamy mood as they relapsed into their old seats again. At last Stacy drew a long breath. "I wish we had sent those nuggets off with the others this morning."

"Why?" said Demorest suddenly.

"Why? Well, d—n it all! they kind of oppress me, don't you see. I seem to feel 'em here, on my chest — all the three," returned Stacy only half jocularly. "It's their d—d specific gravity, I suppose. I don't like the idea of sleeping in the same room with 'em. They're altogether too much for us three men to be left alone with."

"You don't mean that you think that anybody would attempt" — said Demorest.

Stacy curled a fighting lip rather superciliously. "No; I don't think *that*, — I rather wish I did. It's the blessed chunks of solid gold that seem to have got *us* fast, don't

you know, and are going to stick to us for good or ill. A sort of Frankenstein monster that we 've picked out of a hole from below."

"I know just what Stacy means," said Barker breathlessly, rounding his gray eyes. "I 've felt it, too. Could n't we make a sort of cache of it — bury it just outside the cabin for to-night? It would be sort of putting it back into its old place, you know, for the time being. *It* might like it."

The other two laughed. "Rather rough on Providence, Barker boy," said Stacy, "handing back the Heaven-sent gift so soon! Besides, what 's to keep any prospector from coming along and making a strike of it? You know that 's mining law — if you have n't preëmpted the spot as a claim."

But Barker was too staggered by this material statement to make any reply, and Demorest arose. "And I feel that you 'd both better be turning in, as we 've got to get up early." He went to the corner of the cabin, and threw the blanket back over the pan and its treasure. "There! that 'll keep the chunks from getting up to ride astride of you like a nightmare." He shut the door and gave a momentary glance at its cheap hinges and the absence of bolt or bar. Stacy caught his eye. "We 'll miss this security in San Francisco — perhaps even in Boomville," he sighed.

It was scarcely ten o'clock, but Stacy and Barker had begun to undress themselves with intervals of yawning and desultory talk, Barker continuing an amusing story, with one stocking off and his trousers hanging on his arm, until at last both men were snugly curled up in their respective bunks. Presently Stacy's voice came from under the blankets: —

"Hallo! are n't you going to turn in, too?"

"Not yet," said Demorest from his chair before the fire. "You see it 's the last night in the old shanty, and I reckon I 'll see the rest of it out."

"That 's so," said the impulsive Barker, struggling violently with his blankets. "I tell you what, boys: we just ought to make a watch-night of it — a regular vigil, you know — until twelve at least. Hold on! I 'll get up, too!" But here Demorest arose, caught his youthful partner's bare foot, which went searching painfully for the ground, in one hand, tucked it back under the blankets, and heaping them on the top of him, patted the bulk with an authoritative, paternal air.

"You 'll just say your prayers and go to sleep, sonny. You 'll want to be fresh as a daisy to appear before Miss Kitty to-morrow early, and you can keep your vigils for to-morrow night, after dinner, in the back drawing-room. I said 'Good-night,' and I mean it!"

Protesting feebly, Barker finally yielded in a nestling shiver and a sudden silence. Demorest walked back to his chair. A prolonged snore came from Stacy's bunk; then everything was quiet. Demorest stirred up the fire, cast a huge root upon it, and, leaning back in his chair, sat with half-closed eyes and dreamed.

It was an old dream that for the past three years had come to him daily, sometimes even overtaking him under the shade of a buckeye in his noontide rest on his claim, — a dream that had never yet failed to wait for him at night by the fireside when his partners were at rest; a dream of the past, but so real that it always made the present seem the dream through which he was moving towards some sure awakening.

It was not strange that it should come to him to-night, as it had often come before, slowly shaping itself out of the obscurity as the vision of a fair young girl seated in one of the empty chairs before him. Always the same pretty, childlike face, fraught with a half-frightened, half-wondering trouble; always the same slender, graceful figure, but always glimmering in diamonds, and satin, or spiritual in

lace and pearls, against his own rude and sordid surroundings; always silent with parted lips, until the night wind smote some chord of recollection, and then mingled a remembered voice with his own. For at those times he seemed to speak also, albeit with closed lips, and an utterance inaudible to all but her.

"Well?" he said sadly.

"Well?" the voice repeated, like a gentle echo blending with his own.

"You know it all now," he went on. "You know that it has come at last, — all that I had worked for, prayed for; all that would have made us happy here; all that would have saved you to me has come at last, and all too late!"

"Too late!" echoed the voice with his.

"You remember," he went on, "the last day we were together. You remember your friends and family would have you give me up — a penniless man. You remember when they reproached you with my poverty, and told you that it was only your wealth that I was seeking, that I then determined to go away and never to return to claim you until that reproach could be removed. You remember, dearest, how you clung to me and bade me stay with you, even fly with you, but not to leave you alone with them. You wore the same dress that day, darling; your eyes had the same wondering, childlike fear and trouble in them; your jewels glittered on you as you trembled, and I refused. In my pride, or rather in my weakness and cowardice, I refused. I came away and broke my heart among these rocks and ledges, yet grew strong; and you, my love, *you*, sheltered and guarded by those you loved, *you*" — He stopped and buried his face in his hands. The night wind breathed down the chimney, and from the stirred ashes on the hearth came the soft whisper, "I died."

"And then," he went on, "I cared for nothing. Some-

times my heart awoke for this young partner of mine in his innocent, trustful love for a girl that even in her humble station was far beyond his hopes, and I pitied myself in him. Home, fortune, friends, I no longer cared for — all were forgotten. And now they are returning to me — only that I may see the hollowness and vanity of them, and taste the bitterness for which I have sacrificed you. And here, on this last night of my exile, I am confronted with only the jealousy, the doubt, the meanness and selfishness that is to come. Too late! Too late!"

The wondering, troubled eyes that had looked into his here appeared to clear and brighten with a sweet prescience. Was it the wind moaning in the chimney that seemed to whisper to him: "Too late, beloved, for *me*, but not for you. *I* died, but Love still lives. Be happy, Philip. And in your happiness I too may live again."

He started. In the flickering firelight the chair was empty. The wind that had swept down the chimney had stirred the ashes with a sound like the passage of a rustling skirt. There was a chill in the air and a smell like that of opened earth. A nervous shiver passed over him. Then he sat upright. There was no mistake; it was no superstitious fancy, but a faint, damp current of air was actually flowing across his feet towards the fireplace. He was about to rise when he stopped suddenly and became motionless.

He was actively conscious now of a strange sound which had affected him even in the preoccupation of his vision. It was a gentle brushing of some yielding substance like that made by a soft broom on sand, or the sweep of a gown. But to his mountain ears, attuned to every woodland sound, it was not like the gnawing of gopher or squirrel, the scratching of wildcat, nor the hairy rubbing of bear. Nor was it human; the long, deep respirations of his sleeping companions were distinct from that monotonous sound. He could not even tell if it were *in* the cabin or without

Suddenly his eye fell upon the pile in the corner. The blanket that covered the treasure was actually moving!

He rose quickly, but silently, alert, self-contained, and menacing. For this dreamer, this bereaved man, this scornful philosopher of riches had disappeared with that midnight trespass upon the sacred treasure. The movement of the blanket ceased; the soft, swishing sound recommenced. He drew a glittering bowie-knife from his boot-leg, and in three noiseless strides was beside the pile. There he saw what he fully expected to see, — a narrow, horizontal gap between the log walls of the cabin and the adobe floor, slowly widening and deepening by the burrowing of unseen hands from without. The cold outer air which he had felt before was now plainly flowing into the heated cabin through the opening. The swishing sound recommenced, and stopped. Then the four fingers of a hand, palm downwards, were cautiously introduced between the bottom log and the denuded floor. Upon that intruding hand the bowie-knife of Demorest descended like a flash of lightning. There was no outcry. Even in that supreme moment Demorest felt a pang of admiration for the stoicism of the unseen trespasser. But the maimed hand was quickly withdrawn, and as quickly Demorest rushed to the door and dashed into the outer darkness.

For an instant he was dazed and bewildered by the sudden change. But the next moment he saw a dodging, doubling figure running before him, and threw himself upon it. In the shock both men fell, but even in that contact Demorest felt the tangled beard and alcoholic fumes of Whiskey Dick, and felt also that the hands which were thrown up against his breast, the palms turned outward with the instinctive movement of a timid, defenseless man, were unstained with soil or blood. With an oath he threw the drunkard from him and dashed to the rear of the cabin. But too late! There, indeed, was the scattered earth, there

the widened burrow as it had been excavated apparently by that mutilated hand — but nothing else!

He turned back to Whiskey Dick. But the miserable man, although still retaining a look of dazed terror in his eyes, had recovered his feet in a kind of angry confidence and a forced sense of injury. What did Demorest mean by attacking "innoshent" gentlemen on the trail outside his cabin? Yes! *outside* his cabin, he would swear it!

"What were you doing here at midnight?" demanded Demorest.

What was he doing? What was any gentleman doing? He was n't any molly-coddle to go to bed at ten o'clock! What was he doing? Well — he 'd been with men who did n't shut their doors and turn the boys out just in the shank of the evening. He was n't any Barker to be wet-nursed by Demorest.

"Some one else was here!" said Demorest sternly, with his eyes fixed on Whiskey Dick. The dull glaze which seemed to veil the outer world from the drunkard's pupils shifted suddenly with such a look of direct horror that Demorest was fain to turn away his own. But the veil mercifully returned, and with it Dick's worked-up sense of injury. Nobody was there — not "a shole." Did Demorest think if there had been any of his friends there they would have stood by like "dogsh" and seen him insulted?

Demorest turned away and reëntered the cabin as Dick lurched heavily forward, still muttering, down the trail. The excitement over, a sickening repugnance to the whole incident took the place of Demorest's resentment and indignation. There had been a cowardly attempt to rob them of their miserable treasure. He had met it and frustrated it in almost as brutal a fashion: the gold was already tarnished with blood. To his surprise, yet relief, he found his partners unconscious of the outrage, still sleeping with the physical immobility of over-excited and tired men.

Should he awaken them? No! He should have to awaken also their suspicions and desire for revenge. There was no danger of a further attack; there was no fear that the culprit would disclose himself, and to-morrow they would be far away. Let oblivion rest upon that night's stain on the honor of Heavy Tree Hill.

He rolled a small barrel before the opening, smoothed the dislodged earth, replaced the pan with its treasure, and trusted that in the bustle of the early morning departure his partners might not notice any change. Stopping before the bunk of Stacy he glanced at the sleeping man. He was lying on his back, breathing heavily, and his hands were moving towards his chest as if, indeed, his strange fancy of the golden incubus were being realized. Demorest would have wakened him, but presently, with a sigh of relief, the sleeper turned over on his side. It was pleasanter to look at Barker, whose damp curls were matted over his smooth, boyish forehead, and whose lips were parted in a smile under the silken wings of his brown mustache. He, too, seemed to be trying to speak, and remembering some previous revelations which had amused them, Demorest leaned over him fraternally with an answering smile, waiting for the beloved one's name to pass the young man's lips. But he only murmured, "Three — hundred — thousand dollars!" The elder man turned away with a grave face. The influence of the treasure was paramount.

When he had placed one of the chairs against the unprotected door at an angle which would prevent any easy or noiseless intrusion, Demorest threw himself on his bunk without undressing, and turned his face towards the single window of the cabin that looked towards the east. He did not apprehend another covert attempt against the gold. He did not fear a robbery with force and arms, although he was satisfied that there was more than one concerned in it, but this he attributed only to the encumbering weight of

their expected booty. He simply waited for the dawn. It was some time before his eyes were greeted with the vague opaline brightness of the firmament which meant the vanishing of the pallid snow-line before the coming day. A bird twittered on the roof. The air was chill; he drew his blanket around him. Then he closed his eyes, he fancied only for a moment, but when he opened them the door was standing open in the strong daylight. He sprang to his feet, but the next moment he saw it was only Stacy who had passed out, and was returning fully dressed, bringing water from the spring to fill the kettle. But Stacy's face was so grave that, recalling his disturbed sleep, Demorest laughingly inquired if he had been haunted by the treasure. But to his surprise Stacy put down the kettle, and, with a hurried glance at the still sleeping Barker, said in a low voice: —

"I want you to do something for me without asking why. Later I will tell you."

Demorest looked at him fixedly. "What is it?" he said.

"The pack-mules will be here in a few moments. Don't wait to close up or put away anything here, but clap that gold in the saddle-bags, and take Barker with you and 'lite' out for Boomville *at once*. I will overtake you later."

"Is there no time to discuss this?" asked Demorest.

"No," said Stacy bluntly. "Call me a crank, say I 'm in a blue funk" — his compressed lips and sharp black eyes did not lend themselves much to that hypothesis — "only get out of this with that stuff, and take Barker with you! I 'm not responsible for myself while it 's here."

Demorest knew Stacy to be combative, but practical. If he had not been assured of his partner's last night slumbers, he might have thought he knew of the attempt. Or if he had discovered the turned-up ground in the rear of the cabin, his curiosity would have demanded an explanation. Demorest paused only for a moment, and said, "Very well, I will go."

"Good! I 'll rouse out Barker, but not a word to him — except that he must go."

The rousing out of Barker consisted of Stacy's lifting that young gentleman bodily from his bunk and standing him upright in the open doorway. But Barker was accustomed to this Spartan process, and after a moment's balancing with closed lids like an unwrapped mummy, he sat down in the doorway and began to dress. He at first demurred to their departure except all together — it was so unfraternal; but eventually he allowed himself to be persuaded out of it and into his clothes. For Barker had also had *his* visions in the night, one of which was that they should build a beautiful villa on the site of the old cabin and solemnly agree to come every year and pass a week in it together. "I thought at first," he said, sliding along the floor in search of different articles of his dress, or stopping gravely to catch them as they were thrown to him by his partners, "that we 'd have it at Boomville, as being handier to get there; but I 've concluded we 'd better have it here, a little higher up the hill, where it could be seen over the whole Black Spur Range. When we were n't here we could use it as a Hut of Refuge for broken-down or washed-out miners or weary travelers, like those hospices in the Alps, you know, and have somebody to keep it for us. You see I 've thought even of *that*, and Van Loo is the very man to take charge of it for us. You see he 's got such good manners and speaks two languages. Lord! if a German or Frenchman came along, poor and distressed, Van Loo would just chip in his own language. See? You 've got to think of all these details, you see, boys. And we might call it 'The Rest of the Three Partners,' or 'Three Partners' Rest.'"

"And you might begin by giving us one," said Stacy. "Dry up, and drink your coffee."

"I 'll draw out the plans. I 've got it all in my head,"

continued the enthusiastic Barker, unheeding the interruption. "I 'll just run out and take a look at the site, it 's only right back of the cabin." But here Stacy caught him by his dangling belt as he was flying out of the door with one boot on, and thrust him down in a chair with a tin cup of coffee in his hand.

"Keep the plans in your head, Barker boy," said Demorest, "for here are the pack-mules and packer." This was quite enough to divert the impressionable young man, who speedily finished his dressing, as a mule bearing a large pack-saddle and two enormous saddle-bags or pouches drove up before the door, led by a muleteer on a small horse. The transfer of the treasure to the saddle-bags was quickly made by their united efforts, as the first rays of the sun were beginning to paint the hillside. Shading his keen eyes with his hand, Stacy stood in the doorway and handed Demorest the two rifles.

Demorest hesitated. "Had n't *you* better keep one?" he said, looking in his partner's eyes with his first challenge of curiosity.

The sun seemed to put a humorous twinkle into Stacy's glance as he returned, "Not much! And you 'd better take my revolver with you too. I 'm feeling a little better now," he said, looking at the saddle-bags, "but I 'm not fit to be trusted yet with carnal weapons. When the other mule comes and is packed, I 'll overtake you on the horse."

A little more satisfied, although still wondering and perplexed, Demorest shouldered one rifle, and with Barker, who was carrying the other, followed the muleteer and his equipage down the trail. For a while he was a little ashamed of his part in this unusual spectacle of two armed men convoying a laden mule in broad daylight, but, luckily, it was too early for the Bar miners to be going to work, and as the tunnelmen were now at breakfast, the trail was free of wayfarers. At the point where it crossed the main road

Demorest, however, saw Steptoe and Whiskey Dick emerge from the thicket, apparently in earnest conversation. Demorest felt his repugnance and half-restrained suspicions suddenly return. Yet he did not wish to betray them before Barker, nor was he willing, in case of an emergency, to allow the young man to be entirely unprepared. Calling him to follow, he ran quickly ahead of the laden mule, and was relieved to find that, looking back, his companion had brought his rifle to a "ready," through some instinctive feeling of defense. As Steptoe and Whiskey Dick, a moment later, discovering them, were evidently surprised, there seemed, however, to be no reason for fearing an outbreak. Suddenly, at a whisper from Steptoe, he and Whiskey Dick both threw up their hands, and stood still on the trail a few yards from them in a burlesque of the usual recognized attitude of helplessness, while a hoarse laugh broke from Steptoe.

"D—d if we did n't think you were road-agents! But we see you 're only guarding your treasure. Rather fancy style for Heavy Tree Hill, ain't it? Things must be gettin' rough up thar to hev to take out your guns like that!"

Demorest had looked keenly at the four hands thus exhibited, and was more concerned that they bore no trace of wounds or mutilation than at the insult of the speech, particularly as he had a distinct impression that the action was intended to show him the futility of his suspicions.

"I am glad to see that if you have n't any arms in your hands, you 're not incapable of handling them," said Demorest coolly, as he passed by them and again fell into the rear of the muleteer.

But Barker had thought the incident very funny, and laughed effusively at Whiskey Dick. "I did n't know that Steptoe was up to that kind of fun," he said, "and I suppose we *did* look rather rough with these guns as we ran on ahead of the mule. But then you know that when

you called to me I really thought you were in for a shindy. All the same, Whiskey Dick did that 'hands up' to perfection: how he managed it I don't know, but his knees seemed to knock together as if he was in a real funk."

Demorest had thought so too, but he made no reply. How far that miserable drunkard was a forced or willing accomplice of the events of last night was part of a question that had become more and more repugnant to him as he was leaving the scene of it forever. It had come upon him, desecrating the dream he had dreamt that last night and turning its hopeful climax to bitterness. Small wonder that Barker, walking by his side, had his quick sympathies aroused, and as he saw that shadow, which they were all familiar with, but had never sought to penetrate, fall upon his companion's handsome face, even his youthful spirits yielded to it. They were both relieved when the clatter of hoofs behind them, as they reached the valley, announced the approach of Stacy. "I started with the second mule and the last load soon after you left," he explained, "and have just passed them. I thought it better to join you and let the other load follow. Nobody will interfere with *that*."

"Then you are satisfied?" said Demorest, regarding him steadfastly.

"You bet! Look!"

He turned in his saddle and pointed to the crest of the hill they had just descended. Above the pines circling the lower slope above the bare ledges of rock and outcrop, a column of thick black smoke was rising straight as a spire in the windless air.

"That's the old shanty passing away," said Stacy complacently. "I reckon there won't be much left of it before we get to Boomville."

Demorest and Barker stared. "You fired it?" said Barker, trembling with excitement.

"Yes," said Stacy. "I could n't bear to leave the old

rookery for coyotes and wildcats to gather in, so I touched her off before I left."

"But" — said Barker.

"But," repeated Stacy composedly. "Hallo! what's the matter with that new plan of 'The Rest' that you're going to build, eh? You don't want them *both*."

"And you did this rather than leave the dear old cabin to strangers?" said Barker, with kindling eyes. "Stacy, I did n't think you had that poetry in you!"

"There's heaps in me, Barker boy, that you don't know, and I don't exactly sabe myself."

"Only," continued the young fellow eagerly, "we ought to have *all* been there! We ought to have made a solemn rite of it, you know, — a kind of sacrifice. We ought to have poured a kind of libation on the ground!"

"I did sprinkle a little kerosene over it, I think," returned Stacy, "just to help things along. But if you want to see her flaming, Barker, you just run back to that last corner on the road beyond the big redwood. That's the spot for a view."

As Barker — always devoted to a spectacle — swiftly disappeared, the two men faced each other. "Well, what does it all mean?" said Demorest gravely.

"It means, old man," said Stacy suddenly, "that if we had n't had nigger luck, the same blind luck that sent us that strike, you and I and that Barker over there would have been swirling in that smoke up to the sky about two hours ago!" He stopped and added in a lower, but earnest voice, "Look here, Phil! When I went out to fetch water this morning, I smelt something queer. I went round to the back of the cabin and found a hole dug under the floor, and piled against the corner wall a lot of brushwood and a can of kerosene. Some of the kerosene had been already poured on the brush. Everything was ready to light, and only my coming out an hour earlier had frightened the

devils away. The idea was to set the place on fire, suffocate us in the smoke of the kerosene poured into the hole, and then to rush in and grab the treasure. It was a systematic plan!"

"No!" said Demorest quietly.

"No?" repeated Stacy. "I told you I saw the whole thing and took away the kerosene, which I hid, and after you had gone used it to fire the cabin with, to see if the ones I suspected would gather to watch their work."

"It was no part of their *first* plan," said Demorest, "which was only robbery. Listen!" He hurriedly recounted his experience of the preceding night to the astonished Stacy. "No, the fire was an afterthought and revenge," he added sternly.

"But you say you cut the robber in the hand; there would be no difficulty in identifying him by that."

"I wounded only a *hand*," said Demorest. "But there was a *head* in that attempt that I never saw." He then revealed his own half-suspicions, but how they were apparently refuted by the bravado of Steptoe and Whiskey Dick.

"Then that was the reason *they* did n't gather at the fire," said Stacy quickly.

"Ah!" said Demorest, "then *you* too suspected them?"

Stacy hesitated, and then said abruptly, "Yes."

Demorest was silent for a moment. "Why did n't you tell me this this morning?" he said gently.

Stacy pointed to the distant Barker. "I did n't want you to tell him. I thought it better for one partner to keep a secret from two than for the two to keep it from one. Why did n't you tell me of your experience last night?"

"I am afraid it was for the same reason," said Demorest, with a faint smile. "And it sometimes seems to me, Jim, that we ought to imitate Barker's frankness. In our dread of tainting him with our own knowledge of evil we are

sending him out into the world very poorly equipped, for all his three hundred thousand dollars."

"I reckon you 're right," said Stacy briefly, extending his hand. "Shake on that!"

The two men grasped each other's hands.

"And he 's no fool, either," continued Demorest. "When we met Steptoe on the road, without a word from me, he closed up alongside, with his hand on the lock of his rifle. And I had n't the heart to praise him or laugh it off."

Nevertheless they were both silent as the object of their criticism bounded down the trail towards them. He had seen the funeral pyre. It was awfully sad, it was awfully lovely, but there was something grand in it! Who could have thought Stacy could be so poetic? But he wanted to tell them something else that was mighty pretty.

"What was it?" said Demorest.

"Well," said Barker, "don't laugh! But you know that Jack Hamlin? Well, boys, he 's been hovering around us on his mustang, keeping us and that pack-mule in sight ever since we left. Sometimes he 's on a side trail off to the right, sometimes off to the left, but always at the same distance. I did n't like to tell you, boys, for I thought you 'd laugh at me; but I think, you know, he 's taken a sort of shine to us since he dropped in last night. And I fancy, you see, he 's sort of hanging round to see that we get along all right. I 'd have pointed him out before, only I reckoned you and Stacy would say he was making up to us for our money."

"And we 'd have been wrong, Barker boy," said Stacy, with a heartiness that surprised Demorest, "for I reckon your instinct 's the right one."

"There he is now," said the gratified Barker, "just abreast of us on the cut-off. He started just after we did, and he 's got a horse that could have brought him into Boomville hours ago. It 's just his kindness."

He pointed to a distant fringe of buckeye, from which

Jack Hamlin had just emerged. Although evidently holding in a powerful mustang, nothing could be more unconscious and utterly indifferent than his attitude. He did not seem to know of the proximity of any other traveler, and to care less. His handsome head was slightly thrown back, as if he was caroling after his usual fashion, but the distance was too great to make his melody audible to them, or to allow Barker's shout of invitation to reach him. Suddenly he lowered his tightened rein, the mustang sprang forward, and with a flash of silver spurs and bridle fripperies he had disappeared. But as the trail he was pursuing crossed theirs a mile beyond, it seemed quite possible that they should again meet him.

They were now fairly into the Boomville valley, and were entering a narrow arroyo bordered with dusky willows which effectually excluded the view on either side. It was the bed of a mountain torrent that in winter descended the hillside over the trail by which they had just come, but was now sunk into the thirsty plain between banks that varied from two to five feet in height. The muleteer had advanced into the narrow channel when he suddenly cast a hurried glance behind him, uttered a "Madre de Dios!" and backed his mule and his precious freight against the bank. The sound of hoofs on the trail in their rear had caught his quicker ear, and as the three partners turned they beheld three horsemen thundering down the hill towards them. They were apparently Mexican vaqueros of the usual common swarthy type, their faces made still darker by the black silk handkerchief tied round their heads under their stiff sombreros. Either they were unable or unwilling to restrain their horses in their headlong speed, and a collision in that narrow passage was imminent; but suddenly, before reaching its entrance, they diverged with a volley of oaths, and dashing along the left bank of the arroyo, disappeared in the intervening willows. Divided between relief

at their escape and indignation at what seemed to be a drunken, feast-day freak of these roystering vaqueros, the little party re-formed, when a cry from Barker arrested them. He had just perceived a horseman motionless in the arroyo who, although unnoticed by them, had evidently been seen by the Mexicans. He had apparently leaped into it from the bank, and had halted as if to witness this singular incident. As the clatter of the vaqueros' hoofs died away, he lightly leaped the bank again and disappeared. But in that single glimpse of him they recognized Jack Hamlin. When they reached the spot where he had halted, they could see that he must have approached it from the trail where they had previously seen him, but which they now found crossed it at right angles. Barker was right. He had really kept them at easy distance the whole length of the journey.

But they were now reaching its end. When they issued at last from the arroyo, they came upon the outskirts of Boomville and the great stage-road. Indeed, the six horses of the Pioneer coach were just panting along the last half mile of the steep up-grade as they approached. They halted mechanically as the heavy vehicle swayed and creaked by them. In their ordinary working dress, sunburnt with exposure, covered with dust, and carrying their rifles still in their hands, they, perhaps, presented a sufficiently characteristic appearance to draw a few faces — some of them pretty and intelligent — to the windows of the coach as it passed. The sensitive Barker was quickest to feel that resentment with which the pioneer usually met the wide-eyed criticism of the Eastern tourist or "greenhorn," and reddened under the bold scrutiny of a pair of black inquisitive eyes behind an eyeglass. That annoyance was communicated, though in a lesser degree, even to the bearded Demorest and Stacy. It was an unexpected contact with that great world in which they were so soon to enter. They felt ashamed of their appearance, and yet ashamed of that

feeling. They felt a secret satisfaction when Barker said, "They 'd open their eyes wider if they knew what was in that pack-saddle," and yet they corrected him for what they were pleased to call his "snobbishness." They hurried a little faster as the road became more frequented, as if eager to shorten their distance to clean clothes and civilization.

Only Demorest began to linger in the rear. This contact with the stagecoach had again brought him face to face with his buried past. He felt his old dream revive, and occasionally turned to look back upon the dark outlines of Black Spur, under whose shadow it had returned so often, and wondered if he had left it there forever, and it were now slowly exhaling with the thinned and dying smoke of their burning cabin.

His companions, knowing his silent moods, had preceded him at some distance, when he heard the soft sound of ambling hoofs on the thick dust, and suddenly the light touch of Jack Hamlin's gauntlet on his shoulder. The mustang Jack bestrode was reeking with grime and sweat, but Jack himself was as immaculate and fresh as ever. With a delightful affectation of embarrassment and timidity he began flicking the side buttons of his velvet vaquero trousers with the thong of his riata. "I reckoned to sling a word along with you before you went," he said, looking down, "but I 'm so shy that I could n't do it in company. So I thought I 'd get it off on you while you were alone."

"We 've seen you once or twice before, this morning," said Demorest pleasantly, "and we were sorry you did n't join us."

"I reckon I might have," said Jack gayly, "if my horse had only made up his mind whether he was a bird or a squirrel, and had n't been so various and promiscuous about whether he wanted to climb a tree or fly. He 's not a bad horse for a Mexican plug, only when he thinks there is any devilment around he wants to wade in and take a

hand. However, I reckoned to see the last of you and your pile into Boomville. And I *did*. When I meet three fellows like you that are clean white all through, I sort of cotton to 'em, even if *I'm* a little of a brunette myself. And I've got something to give you."

He took from a fold of his scarlet sash a small parcel neatly folded in white paper as fresh and spotless as himself. Holding it in his fingers, he went on: "I happened to be at Heavy Tree Hill early this morning before sun-up. In the darkness I struck your cabin, and I reckon — I struck somebody else! At first I thought it was one of you chaps down on your knees praying at the rear of the cabin, but the way the fellow lit out when he smelt me coming made me think it was n't entirely fasting and prayer. However, I went to the rear of the cabin, and then I reckoned some kind friend had been bringing you kindlings and firewood for your early breakfast. But that did n't satisfy me, so I knelt down as he had knelt, and then I saw — well, Mr. Demorest, I reckon I saw *just what you have seen!* But even then I was n't quite satisfied, for that man had been grubbing round as if searching for something. So I searched too — and I found *it*. I've got it here. I'm going to give it to you, for it may some day come in handy, and you won't find anything like it among the folks where you're going. It's something unique, as those fine-art-collecting sharps in 'Frisco say — something quite matchless, unless you try to match it one day yourself! Don't open the paper until I run on and say 'So long' to your partners. Good-by."

He grasped Demorest's hand and then dropped the little packet into his palm, and ambled away towards Stacy and Barker. Holding the packet in his hand with an amused yet puzzled smile, Demorest watched the gambler give Stacy's hand a hearty farewell shake and a supplementary slap on the back to the delighted Barker, and then vanish

in a flash of red sash and silver buttons. At which Demorest, walking slowly towards his partners, opened the packet, and stood suddenly still. It contained the dried and bloodless second finger of a human hand cut off at the first joint!

For an instant he held it at arm's length, as if about to cast it away. Then he grimly replaced it in the paper, put it carefully in his pocket, and silently walked after his companions.

CHAPTER I

A STRONG southwester was beating against the windows and doors of Stacy's Bank in San Francisco, and spreading a film of rain between the regular splendors of its mahogany counters and sprucely dressed clerks and the usual passing pedestrian. For Stacy's new banking-house had long since received the epithet of "palatial" from an enthusiastic local press fresh from the "opening" luncheon in its richly decorated directors' rooms, and it was said that once a homely would-be depositor from One Horse Gulch was so cowed by its magnificence that his heart failed him at the last moment, and mumbling an apology to the elegant receiving teller, fled with his greasy chamois pouch of gold-dust to deposit his treasure in the dingy Mint around the corner. Perhaps there was something of this feeling, mingled with a certain simple-minded fascination, in the hesitation of a stranger of a higher class who entered the bank that rainy morning and finally tendered his card to the important negro messenger.

The card preceded him through noiselessly swinging doors and across heavily carpeted passages until it reached the inner core of Mr. James Stacy's private offices, and was respectfully laid before him. He was not alone. At his side, in an attitude of polite and studied expectancy, stood a correct-looking young man, for whom Mr. Stacy was evidently writing a memorandum. The stranger glanced furtively at the card, with a curiosity hardly in keeping with his suggested good breeding; but Stacy did not look at it until he had finished his memorandum.

"There," he said, with business decision, "you can tell your people that if we carry their new debentures over our limit, we will expect a larger margin. Ditches are not what they were three years ago when miners were willing to waste their money over your rates. They don't gamble *that way* any more, and your company ought to know it, and not gamble themselves over that prospect." He handed the paper to the stranger, who bowed over it with studied politeness, and backed towards the door. Stacy took up the waiting card, read it, said to the messenger, "Show him in," and in the same breath turned to his guest: "I say, Van Loo, it 's George Barker! You know him."

"Yes," said Van Loo, with a polite hesitation as he halted at the door. "He was — I think — er — in your employ at Heavy Tree Hill."

"Nonsense! He was my *partner*. And you must have known him since at Boomville. Come! He got forty shares of Ditch stock — through you — at 110, which were worth about 80! *Somebody* must have made money enough by it to remember him."

"I was only speaking of him socially," said Van Loo, with a deprecating smile. "You know he married a young woman — the hotel-keeper's daughter, who used to wait at the table — and after my mother and sister came out to keep house for me at Boomville it was quite impossible for me to see much of him, for he seldom went out without his wife, you know."

"Yes," said Stacy dryly, "I think you did n't like his marriage. But I 'm glad your disinclination to see him is n't on account of that deal in stocks."

"Oh no," said Van Loo. "Good-by."

But, unfortunately, in the next passage he came upon Barker, who with a cry of unfeigned pleasure, none the less sincere that he was feeling a little alien in these impressive

surroundings, recognized him. Nothing could exceed Van Loo's protest of delight at the meeting; nothing his equal desolation at the fact that he was hastening to another engagement. "But your old partner," he added, with a smile, "is waiting for you; he has just received your card, and I should be only keeping you from him. So glad to see you; you 're looking so well. Good-by! Good-by!"

Reassured, Barker no longer hesitated, but dashed with his old impetuousness into his former partner's room. Stacy, already deeply absorbed in other business, was sitting with his back towards him, and Barker's arms were actually encircling his neck before the astonished and half-angry man looked up. But when his eyes met the laughing gray ones of Barker above him, he gently disengaged himself with a quick return of the caress, rose, shut the door of an inner office, and returning pushed Barker into an armchair in quite the old suppressive fashion of former days. Yes; it was the same Stacy that Barker looked at, albeit his brown beard was now closely cropped around his determined mouth and jaw in a kind of grave decorum, and his energetic limbs already attuned to the rigor of clothes of fashionable cut and still more rigorous sombreness of color.

"Barker boy," he began, with the familiar twinkle in his keen eyes which the younger partner remembered, "I don't encourage stag dancing among my young men during bank hours, and you 'll please to remember that we are not on Heavy Tree Hill" —

"Where," broke in Barker enthusiastically, "we were only overlooked by the Black Spur Range and the Sierran snow-line; where the nearest voice that came to you was quarter of a mile away as the crow flies and nearly a mile by the trail."

"And was generally an oath!" said Stacy. "But you 're in San Francisco *now*. Where are you stopping?"

He took up a pencil and held it over a memorandum pad awaitingly.

"At the Brook House. It 's" —

"Hold on! 'Brook House,'" Stacy repeated, as he jotted it down. "And for how long?"

"Oh, a day or two. You see, Kitty" —

Stacy checked him with a movement of his pencil in the air, and then wrote down, "'Day or two.' Wife with you?"

"Yes; and oh, Stacy, our boy! Ah!" he went on, with a laugh, knocking aside the remonstrating pencil, "you must listen! He 's just the sweetest, knowingest little chap living. Do you know what we 're going to christen him? Well, he 'll be Stacy Demorest Barker. Good names, are n't they? And then it perpetuates the dear old friendship."

Stacy picked up the pencil again, wrote "Wife and child S. D. B.," and leaned back in his chair. "Now, Barker," he said briefly, "I 'm coming to dine with you to-night at 7.30 sharp. *Then* we 'll talk Heavy Tree Hill, wife, baby, and S. D. B. But here I 'm all for business. Have you any with me?"

Barker, who was easily amused, had extracted a certain entertainment out of Stacy's memorandum, but he straightened himself with a look of eager confidence and said, "Certainly; that 's just what it is — business. Lord! Stacy, I 'm *all* business now. I 'm in everything. And I bank with you, though perhaps you don't know it; it 's in your Branch at Marysville. I did n't want to say anything about it to you before. But Lord! you don't suppose that I 'd bank anywhere else while you are in the business — checks, dividends, and all that; but in this matter I felt you knew, old chap. I did n't want to talk to a banker nor to a bank, but to Jim Stacy, my old partner."

"Barker," said Stacy curtly, "how much money are you short of?"

At this direct question Barker's always quick color rose, but, with an equally quick smile, he said, "I don't know yet that I 'm short at all."

"But *I* do!"

"Look here, Jim: why, I 'm just overloaded with shares and stocks," said Barker, smiling.

"Not one of which you could realize on without sacrifice. Barker, three years ago you had three hundred thousand dollars put to your account at San Francisco."

"Yes," said Barker, with a quiet reminiscent laugh. "I remember I wanted to draw it out in one check to see how it would look."

"And you 've drawn out all in three years, and it looks d—d bad."

"How did you know it?" asked Barker, his face beaming only with admiration of his companion's omniscience.

"How did I know it?" retorted Stacy. "I know *you*, and I know the kind of people who have unloaded to you."

"Come, Stacy," said Barker, "I 've only invested in shares and stocks like everybody else, and then only on the best advice I could get: like Van Loo's, for instance, — that man who was here just now, the new manager of the Empire Ditch Company; and Carter's, my own Kitty's father. And when I was offered fifty thousand Wide West Extensions, and was hesitating over it, he told me *you* were in it too — and that was enough for me to buy it."

"Yes, but we did n't go into it at his figures."

"No," said Barker, with an eager smile, "but you *sold* at his figures, for I knew that when I found that *you*, my old partner, was in it; don't you see, I preferred to buy it through your bank, and did at 110. Of course, you would n't have sold it at that figure if it was n't worth it then, and neither I nor you are to blame if it dropped the next week to 60, don't you see?"

Stacy's eyes hardened for a moment as he looked keenly into his former partner's bright gray ones, but there was no trace of irony in Barker's. On the contrary, a slight shade of sadness came over them. "No," he said reflectively, "I don't think I've ever been foolish or followed out my *own* ideas, except once, and that was extravagant, I admit. That was my idea of building a kind of refuge, you know, on the site of our old cabin, where poor miners and played-out prospectors waiting for a strike could stay without paying anything. Well, I sunk twenty thousand dollars in that, and might have lost more, only Carter — Kitty's father — persuaded me — he 's an awful clever old fellow — into turning it into a kind of branch hotel of Boomville, while using it as a hotel to take poor chaps who could n't pay, at half prices, or quarter prices, *privately*, don't you see, so as to spare their pride, — awfully pretty, was n't it ? — and make the hotel profit by it."

"Well ? " said Stacy as Barker paused.

"They did n't come," said Barker. "But," he added eagerly, "it shows that things were better than I had imagined. Only the others did not come, either."

"And you lost your twenty thousand dollars," said Stacy curtly.

"*Fifty* thousand," said Barker, "for of course it had to be a larger hotel than the other. And I think that Carter would n't have gone into it except to save me from losing money."

"And yet made you lose fifty thousand instead of twenty. For I don't suppose *he* advanced anything."

"He gave his time and experience," said Barker simply.

"I don't think it worth thirty thousand dollars," said Stacy dryly. "But all this does n't tell me what your business is with me to-day."

"No," said Barker, brightening up, "but it is business, you know. Something in the old style — as between part-

ner and partner — and that 's why I came to *you*, and not to the 'banker.' And it all comes out of something that Demorest once told us; so you see it 's all us three again! Well, you know, of course, that the Excelsior Ditch Company have abandoned the Bar and Heavy Tree Hill. It did n't pay."

"Yes; nor does the company pay any dividends now. You ought to know, with fifty thousand of their stock on your hands."

Barker laughed. "But listen. I found that I could buy up their whole plant and all the ditching along the Black Spur Range for ten thousand dollars."

"And Great Scott! you don't think of taking up their business?" said Stacy aghast.

Barker laughed more heartily. "No. Not their business. But I remember that once Demorest told us, in the dear old days, that it cost nearly as much to make a water ditch as a railroad, in the way of surveying and engineering and levels, you know. And here 's the plant for a railroad. Don't you see?"

"But a railroad from Black Spur to Heavy Tree Hill — what 's the good of that?"

"Why, Black Spur will be in the line of the new Divide Railroad they 're trying to get a bill for in the legislature."

"An infamous piece of wildcat jobbing that will never pass," said Stacy decisively.

"They said *because* it was that, it would pass," said Barker simply. "They say that Watson's Bank is in it, and is bound to get it through. And as that is a rival bank of yours, don't you see, I thought that if *we* could get something real good or valuable out of it, — something that would do the Black Spur good, — it would be all right."

"And was your business to consult me about it?" said Stacy bluntly.

"No," said Barker, "it's too late to consult you now, though I wish I had. I've given my word to take it, and I can't back out. But I have n't the ten thousand dollars, and I came to you."

Stacy slowly settled himself back in his chair, and put both hands in his pockets. "Not a cent, Barker, not a cent."

"I'm not asking it of the *bank*," said Barker, with a smile, "for I could have gone to the bank for it. But as this was something between us, I am asking you, Stacy, as my old partner."

"And I am answering you, Barker, as your old partner, but also as the partner of a hundred other men, who have even a greater right to ask me. And my answer is, Not a cent!"

Barker looked at him with a pale, astonished face and slightly parted lips. Stacy rose, thrust his hands deeper in his pockets, and standing before him went on: —

"Now look here! It's time you should understand me and yourself. Three years ago, when our partnership was dissolved by accident, or mutual consent, we will say, we started afresh, each on our own hook. Through foolishness and bad advice you have in those three years hopelessly involved yourself as you never would have done had we been partners, and yet in your difficulty you ask me and my new partners to help you out of a difficulty in which they have no concern."

"Your *new* partners?" stammered Barker.

"Yes, my new partners; for every man who has a share, or a deposit, or an interest, or a dollar in this bank is my *partner* — even you, with your securities at the Branch, are one; and you may say that in *this* I am protecting you against yourself."

"But you have money — you have private means."

"None to speculate with as you wish me to — on ac-

count of my position; none to give away foolishly as you expect me to — on account of precedent and example. I am a soulless machine taking care of capital intrusted to me and my brains, but decidedly *not* to my heart nor my sentiment. So my answer is, Not a cent!"

Barker's face had changed; his color had come back, but with an older expression. Presently, however, his beaming smile returned, with the additional suggestion of an affectionate toleration which puzzled Stacy.

"I believe you're right, old chap," he said, extending his hand to the banker, "and I wish I had talked to you before. But it's too late now, and I've given my word."

"Your *word!*" said Stacy. "Have you no written agreement?"

"No. My word was accepted." He blushed slightly as if conscious of a great weakness.

"But that is n't legal nor business. And you could n't even hold the Ditch Company to it if *they* choose to back out."

"But I don't think they will," said Barker simply. "And you see my word was n't given entirely to *them.* I bought the thing through my wife's cousin, Henry Spring, a broker, and he makes something by it, from the company, on commission. And I can't go back on *him.* What did you say?"

Stacy had only groaned through his set teeth. "Nothing," he said briefly, "except that I'm coming, as I said before, to dine with you to-night; but no more *business.* I've enough of that with others, and there are some waiting for me in the outer office now."

Barker rose at once, but with the same affectionate smile and tender gravity of countenance, and laid his hand caressingly on Stacy's shoulder. "It's like you to give up so much of your time to me and my foolishness and be so frank with me. And I know it's mighty rough on you to

have to be a mere machine instead of Jim Stacy. Don't you bother about me. I 'll sell some of my Wide West Extension and pull the thing through myself. It 's all right, but I 'm sorry for you, old chap." He glanced around the room at the walls and rich paneling, and added, "I suppose that 's what you have to pay for all this sort of thing?"

Before Stacy could reply, a waiting visitor was announced for the second time, and Barker, with another hand-shake and a reassuring smile to his old partner, passed into the hall, as if the onus of any infelicity in the interview was upon himself alone. But Stacy did not seem to be in a particularly accessible mood to the new caller, who in his turn appeared to be slightly irritated by having been kept waiting over some irksome business. "You don't seem to follow me," he said to Stacy after reciting his business perplexity. "Can't you suggest something?"

"Well, why don't you get hold of one of your board of directors?" said Stacy abstractedly. "There 's Captain Drummond; you and he are old friends. You were comrades in the Mexican War, were n't you?"

"That be d—d!" said his visitor bitterly. "All his interests are the other way, and in a trade of this kind, you know, Stacy, that a man would sacrifice his own brother. Do you suppose that he 'd let up on a sure thing that he 's got just because he and I fought side by side at Cerro Gordo? Come! what are you giving us? You 're the last man I ever expected to hear that kind of flapdoodle from. If it 's because your bank has got some o'her interest and you can't advise me, why don't you say so?" Nevertheless, in spite of Stacy's abrupt disclaimer, he left a few minutes later, half convinced that Stacy's lukewarmness was due to some adverse influence. Other callers were almost as quickly disposed of, and at the end of an hour Stacy found himself again alone.

But not apparently in a very satisfied mood. After a

few moments of purely mechanical memoranda-making, he rose abruptly and opened a small drawer in a cabinet, from which he took a letter still in its envelope. It bore a foreign postmark. Glancing over it hastily, his eyes at last became fixed on a concluding paragraph. "I hope," wrote his correspondent, "that even in the rush of your big business you will sometimes look after Barker. Not that I think the dear old chap will ever go wrong — indeed, I often wish I was as certain of myself as of him and his insight; but I am afraid we were more inclined to be merely amused and tolerant of his wonderful trust and simplicity than to really understand it for his own good and ours. I know you did not like his marriage, and were inclined to believe he was the victim of a rather unscrupulous father and a foolish, unequal girl; but are you satisfied that he would have been the happier without it, or lived his perfect life under other and what you may think wiser conditions? If he *wrote* the poetry that he *lives*, everybody would think him wonderful; for being what he is we never give him sufficient credit." Stacy smiled grimly, and penciled on his memorandum, "He wants it to the amount of ten thousand dollars." "Anyhow," continued the writer, "look after him, Jim, for his sake, your sake, and the sake of — PHIL DEMOREST."

Stacy put the letter back in its envelope, and tossing it grimly aside went on with his calculations. Presently he stopped, restored the letter to his cabinet, and rang a bell on his table. "Send Mr. North here," he said to the negro messenger. In a few moments his chief book-keeper appeared in the doorway.

"Turn to the Branch ledger and bring me a statement of Mr. George Barker's account."

"He was here a moment ago," said North, essaying a confidential look towards his chief.

"I know it," said Stacy coolly, without looking up.

"He's been running a good deal on wildcat lately," suggested North.

"I asked for his account, and not your opinion of it," said Stacy shortly.

The subordinate withdrew, somewhat abashed, but still curious, and returned presently with a ledger which he laid before his chief. Stacy ran his eyes over the list of Barker's securities; it seemed to him that all the wildest schemes of the past year stared him in the face. His finger, however, stopped on the Wide West Extension. "Mr. Barker will be wanting to sell some of this stock. What is it quoted at now?"

"Sixty."

"But I would prefer that Mr. Barker should not offer in the open market at present. Give him seventy for it — private sale; that will be ten thousand dollars paid to his credit. Advise the Branch of this at once, and to keep the transaction quiet."

"Yes, sir," responded the clerk, as he moved towards the door. But he hesitated, and with another essay at confidence said insinuatingly, "I always thought, sir, that Wide West would recover."

Stacy, perhaps not displeased to find what had evidently passed in his subordinate's mind, looked at him and said dryly, "Then I would advise you also to keep that opinion to yourself." But, clever as he was, he had not anticipated the result. Mr. North, though a trusted employee, was human. On arriving in the outer office he beckoned to one of the lounging brokers, and in a low voice said, "I'll take two shares of Wide West, if you can get it cheap."

The broker's face became alert and eager. "Yes, but I say, is anything up?"

"I'm not here to give the business of the bank away," retorted North severely; "take the order or leave it."

The man hurried away. Having thus vindicated his

humanity by also passing the snub he had received from Stacy to an inferior, he turned away to carry out his master's instructions, yet secure in the belief that he had profited by his superior discernment of the real reason of that master's singular conduct. But when he returned to the private room, in hopes of further revelations, Mr. Stacy was closeted with another financial magnate, and had apparently divested his mind of the whole affair.

CHAPTER II

WHEN George Barker returned to the outer ward of the financial stronghold he had penetrated, with its curving sweep of counters, brass railings, and wirework screens defended by the spruce clerks behind them, he was again impressed with the position of the man he had just quitted, and for a moment hesitated, with an inclination to go back. It was with no idea of making a further appeal to his old comrade, but — what would have been odd in any other nature but his — he was affected by a sense that *he* might have been unfair and selfish in his manner to the man panoplied by these defenses, and who was in a measure forced to be a part of them. He would like to have returned and condoled with him. The clerks, who were heartlessly familiar with the anxious bearing of the men who sought interviews with their chief, both before and after, smiled with the whispered conviction that the fresh and ingenuous young stranger had been "chucked" like others until they met his kindly, tolerant, and even superior eyes, and were puzzled. Meanwhile Barker, who had that sublime, natural quality of abstraction over small impertinences which is more exasperating than studied indifference, after his brief hesitation passed out unconcernedly through the swinging mahogany doors into the blowy street. Here the wind and rain revived him; the bank and its curt refusal were forgotten; he walked onward with only a smiling memory of his partner as in the old days. He remembered how Stacy had burned down their old cabin rather than have it fall into sordid or unworthy hands — this Stacy who was now con-

demned to sink his impulses and become a mere machine. He had never known Stacy's real motive for that act, — both Demorest and Stacy had kept their knowledge of the attempted robbery from their younger partner, — it always seemed to him to be a precious revelation of Stacy's inner nature. Facing the wind and rain, he recalled how Stacy, though never so enthusiastic about his marriage as Demorest, had taken up Van Loo sharply for some foolish sneer about his own youthfulness. He was affectionately tolerant of even Stacy's dislike to his wife's relations, for Stacy did not know them as he did. Indeed, Barker, whose own father and mother had died in his infancy, had accepted his wife's relations with a loving trust and confidence that was supreme, from the fact that he had never known any other.

At last he reached his hotel. It was a new one, the latest creation of a feverish progress in hotel-building which had covered five years and as many squares with large, showy erections, utterly beyond the needs of the community, yet each superior in size and adornment to its predecessor. It struck him as being the one evidence of an abiding faith in the future of the metropolis that he had seen in nothing else. As he entered its frescoed hall that afternoon he was suddenly reminded, by its challenging opulency, of the bank he had just quitted, without knowing that the bank had really furnished its capital and its original design. The gilded bar-rooms, flashing with mirrors and cut glass; the saloons, with their desert expanse of Turkey carpet and oasis of clustered divans and gilded tables; the great dining-room, with porphyry columns, and walls and ceilings shining with allegory — all these things which had attracted his youthful wonder without distracting his correct simplicity of taste he now began to comprehend. It was the bank's money "at work." In the clatter of dishes in the dining-room he even seemed to hear again the chinking of coin.

It was a short cut to his apartments to pass through a

smaller public sitting-room popularly known as "Flirtation Camp," where eight or ten couples generally found refuge on chairs and settees by the windows, half concealed by heavy curtains. But the occupants were by no means youthful spinsters or bachelors; they were generally married women, guests of the hotel, receiving other people's husbands whose wives were "in the States," or responsible middle-aged leaders of the town. In the elaborate toilets of the women, as compared with the less formal business suits of the men, there was an odd mingling of the social attitude with perhaps more mysterious confidences. The idle gossip about them had never affected Barker; rather he had that innate respect for the secrets of others which is as inseparable from simplicity as it is from high breeding, and he scarcely glanced at the different couples in his progress through the room. He did not even notice a rather striking and handsome woman, who, surrounded by two or three admirers, yet looked up at Barker as he passed with self-conscious lids as if seeking a return of her glance. But he moved on abstractedly, and only stopped when he suddenly saw the familiar skirt of his wife at a further window, and halted before it.

"Oh, it 's *you*," said Mrs. Barker, with a half-nervous, half-impatient laugh. "Why, I thought you 'd certainly stay half the afternoon with your old partner, considering that you have n't met for three years."

There was no doubt she *had* thought so; there was equally no doubt that the conversation she was carrying on with her companion — a good-looking, portly business man — was effectually interrupted. But Barker did not notice it. "Captain Heath, my husband," she went on, carelessly rising and smoothing her skirts. The captain, who had risen too, bowed vaguely at the introduction, but Barker extended his hand frankly. "I found Stacy busy," he said in answer to his wife, "but he is coming to dine with us to-night."

"If you mean Jim Stacy, the banker," said Captain Heath, brightening into greater ease, "he's the busiest man in California. I've seen men standing in a queue outside his door as in the old days at the post-office. And he only gives you five minutes and no extension. So you and he were partners once?" he said, looking curiously at the still youthful Barker.

But it was Mrs. Barker who answered, "Oh, yes! and always such good friends. I was awfully jealous of him." Nevertheless, she did not respond to the affectionate protest in Barker's eyes nor to the laugh of Captain Heath, but glanced indifferently around the room as if to leave further conversation to the two men. It was possible that she was beginning to feel that Captain Heath was as *de trop* now as her husband had been a moment before. Standing there, however, between them both, idly tracing a pattern on the carpet with the toe of her slipper, she looked prettier than she had ever looked as Kitty Carter. Her slight figure was more fully developed. That artificial severity covering a natural virgin coyness with which she used to wait at table in her father's hotel at Boomville had gone, and was replaced by a satisfied consciousness of her power to please. Her glance was freer, but not as frank as in those days. Her dress was undoubtedly richer and more stylish; yet Barker's loyal heart often reverted fondly to the chintz gown, coquettishly frilled apron, and spotless cuffs and collar in which she had handed him his coffee with a faint color that left his own face crimson.

Captain Heath's tact being equal to her indifference, he had excused himself, although he was becoming interested in this youthful husband. But Mrs. Barker, after having asserted her husband's distinction as the equal friend of the millionaire, was by no means willing that the captain should be further interested in Barker for himself alone, and did not urge him to stay. As he departed she turned to her

husband, and, indicating the group he had passed the moment before, said : —

" That horrid woman has been staring at us all the time. I don't see what you see in her to admire."

Poor Barker's admiration had been limited to a few words of civility in the enforced contact of that huge caravansary and in his quiet, youthful recognition of her striking personality. But he was just then too preoccupied with his interview with Stacy to reply, and perhaps he did not quite understand his wife. It was odd how many things he did not quite understand now about Kitty, but that he knew must be *his* fault. But Mrs. Barker apparently did not require, after the fashion of her sex, a reply. For the next moment, as they moved towards their rooms, she said impatiently, " Well, you don't tell what Stacy said. Did you get the money ? "

I grieve to say that this soul of truth and frankness lied — only to his wife. Perhaps he considered it only lying to *himself*, a thing of which he was at times miserably conscious. " It was n't necessary, dear," he said ; " he advised me to sell my securities in the bank ; and if you only knew how dreadfully busy he is."

Mrs. Barker curled her pretty lip. " It does n't take very long to lend ten thousand dollars ! " she said. " But that 's what I always tell you. You have about made me sick by singing the praises of those wonderful partners of yours, and here you ask a favor of one of them and he tells you to sell your securities ! And you know, and he knows, they 're worth next to nothing."

" You don't understand, dear " — began Barker.

" I understand that you 've given your word to poor Harry," said Mrs. Barker in pretty indignation, " who 's responsible for the Ditch purchase."

" And I shall keep it. I always do," said Barker very quietly, but with that same singular expression of face that

had puzzled Stacy. But Mrs. Barker, who, perhaps, knew her husband better, said in an altered voice: —

"But *how* can you, dear?"

"If I 'm short a thousand or two, I 'll ask your father."

Mrs. Barker was silent. "Father 's so very much harried now, George. Why don't you simply throw the whole thing up?"

"But I 've given my word to your cousin Henry."

"Yes, but only your *word*. There was no written agreement. And you could n't even hold him to it."

Barker opened his frank eyes in astonishment. Her own cousin, too! And they were Stacy's very words!

"Besides," added Mrs. Barker audaciously, "he could get rid of it elsewhere. He had another offer, but he thought yours the best. So don't be silly."

By this time they had reached their rooms. Barker, apparently dismissing the subject from his mind with characteristic buoyancy, turned into the bedroom and walked smilingly towards a small crib which stood in the corner. "Why, he 's gone!" he said in some dismay.

"Well," said Mrs. Barker a little impatiently, "you did n't expect me to take him into the public parlor, where I was seeing visitors, did you? I sent him out with the nurse into the lower hall to play with the other children."

A shade momentarily passed over Barker's face. He always looked forward to meeting the child when he came back. He had a belief, based on no grounds whatever, that the little creature understood him. And he had a father's doubt of the wholesomeness of other people's children who were born into the world indiscriminately and not under the exceptional conditions of his own. "I 'll go and fetch him," he said.

"You have n't told me anything about your interview; what you did and what your good friend Stacy said," said Mrs. Barker, dropping languidly into a chair. "And really

if you are simply running away again after that child, I might just as well have asked Captain Heath to stay longer."

"Oh, as to Stacy," said Barker, dropping beside her and taking her hand; "well, dear, he was awfully busy, you know, and shut up in the innermost office like the agate in one of the Japanese nests of boxes. But," he continued, brightening up, "just the same dear old Jim Stacy of Heavy Tree Hill, when I first knew you. Lord! dear, how it all came back to me! That day I proposed to you in the belief that I was unexpectedly rich, and even bought a claim for the boys on the strength of it, and how I came back to them to find that they had made a big strike on the very claim. Lord! I remember how I was so afraid to tell them about you — and how they guessed it — that dear old Stacy one of the first."

"Yes," said Mrs. Barker, "and I hope your friend Stacy remembered that but for *me*, when you found out that you were not rich, you'd have given up the claim, but that I really deceived my own father to make you keep it. I've often worried over that, George," she said pensively, turning a diamond bracelet around her pretty wrist, "although I never said anything about it."

"But, Kitty darling," said Barker, grasping his wife's hand, "I gave my note for it; you know you said that was bargain enough, and I had better wait until the note was due, and until I found I could n't pay, before I gave up the claim. It was very clever of you, and the boys all said so, too. But you never deceived your father, dear," he said, looking at her gravely, "for I should have told him everything."

"Of course, if you look at it in that way," said his wife languidly, "it's nothing; only I think it ought to be remembered when people go about saying papa ruined you with his hotel schemes."

"Who dares say that?" said Barker indignantly.

"Well, if they don't *say* it, they look it," said Mrs. Barker, with a toss of her pretty head, "and I believe that 's at the bottom of Stacy's refusal."

"But he never said a word, Kitty," said Barker, flushing.

"There, don't excite yourself, George," said Mrs. Barker resignedly, "but go for the baby. I know you 're dying to go, and I suppose it 's time Norah brought it upstairs."

At any other time Barker would have lingered with explanations, but just then a deeper sense than usual of some misunderstanding made him anxious to shorten this domestic colloquy. He rose, pressed his wife's hand, and went out. But yet he was not entirely satisfied with himself for leaving her. "I suppose it is n't right, my going off as soon as I come in," he murmured reproachfully to himself, "but I think she wants the baby back as much as I; only, womanlike, she did n't care to let me know it."

He reached the lower hall, which he knew was a favorite promenade for the nurses, who were gathered at the farther end, where a large window looked upon Montgomery Street. But Norah, the Irish nurse, was not among them; he passed through several corridors in his search, but in vain. At last, worried and a little anxious, he turned to regain his rooms through the long saloon where he had found his wife previously. It was deserted now; the last caller had left — even frivolity had its prescribed limits. He was consequently startled by a gentle murmur from one of the heavily curtained window recesses. It was a woman's voice — low, sweet, caressing, and filled with an almost pathetic tenderness. And it was followed by a distinct gurgling, satisfied crow.

Barker turned instantly in that direction. A step brought him to the curtain, where a singular spectacle presented itself.

Seated on a lounge, completely absorbed and possessed

by her treasure, was the "horrid woman" whom his wife had indicated only a little while ago, holding a baby — Kitty's sacred baby — in her wanton lap! The child was feebly grasping the end of the slender jeweled necklace which the woman held temptingly dangling from a thin white jeweled finger above it. But its eyes were beaming with an intense delight, as if trying to respond to the deep, concentrated love in the handsome face that was bent above it.

At the sudden intrusion of Barker she looked up. There was a faint rise in her color, but no loss of self-possession.

"Please don't scold the nurse," she said, "nor say anything to Mrs. Barker. It is all my fault. I thought that both the nurse and child looked dreadfully bored with each other, and I borrowed the little fellow for a while to try and amuse him. At least I have n't made him cry, have I, dear?" The last epithet, it is needless to say, was addressed to the little creature in her lap, but in its tender modulation it touched the father's quick sympathies as if he had shared it with the child. "You see," she said softly, disengaging the baby fingers from her necklace, "that *our* sex is not the only one tempted by jewelry and glitter."

Barker hesitated; the Madonna-like devotion of a moment ago was gone; it was only the woman of the world who laughingly looked up at him. Nevertheless he was touched. "Have you — ever — had a child, Mrs. Horncastle?" he asked gently and hesitatingly. He had a vague recollection that she passed for a widow, and in his simple eyes all women were virgins or married saints.

"No," she said abruptly. Then she added with a laugh, "Or perhaps I should not admire them so much. I suppose it 's the same feeling bachelors have for other people's wives. But I know you 're dying to take that boy from me. Take him, then, and don't be ashamed to carry him

yourself just because I 'm here; you know you would delight to do it if I were n't."

Barker bent over the silken lap in which the child was comfortably nestling, and in that attitude had a faint consciousness that Mrs. Horncastle was mischievously breathing into his curls a silent laugh. Barker lifted his first-born with proud skillfulness, but that sagacious infant evidently knew when he was comfortable, and in a paroxysm of objection caught his father's curls with one fist, while with the other he grasped Mrs. Horncastle's brown braids and brought their heads into contact. Upon which humorous situation Norah, the nurse, entered.

"It 's all right, Norah," said Mrs. Horncastle, laughing, as she disengaged herself from the linking child. "Mr. Barker has claimed the baby, and has agreed to forgive you and me and say nothing to Mrs. Barker." Norah, with the inscrutable criticism of her sex on her sex, thought it extremely probable, and halted with exasperating discretion. "There," continued Mrs. Horncastle, playfully evading the child's further advances, "go with papa, that 's a dear. Mr. Barker prefers to carry him back, Norah."

"But," said the ingenuous and persistent Barker, still lingering in hopes of recalling the woman's previous expression, "you *do* love children, and you think him a bright little chap for his age?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Horncastle, putting back her loosened braid, "so round and fat and soft. And such a discriminating eye for jewelry. Really you ought to get a necklace like mine for Mrs. Barker — it would please both, you know." She moved slowly away, the united efforts of Norah and Barker scarcely sufficing to restrain the struggling child from leaping after her as she turned at the door and blew him a kiss.

When Barker regained his room he found that Mrs. Barker had dismissed Stacy from her mind except so far

as to invoke Norah's aid in laying out her smartest gown for dinner. "But why take all this trouble, dear?" said her simple-minded husband; "we are going to dine in a private room so that we can talk over old times all by ourselves, and any dress would suit him. And, Lord, dear!" he added, with a quick brightening at the fancy, "if you could only just rig yourself up in that pretty lilac gown you used to wear at Boomville — it would be too killing, and just like old times. I put it away myself in one of our trunks — I could n't bear to leave it behind; I know just where it is. I 'll" — But Mrs. Barker's restraining scorn withheld him.

"George Barker, if you think I am going to let you throw away and utterly *waste* Mr. Stacy on us, alone, in a private room with closed doors — and I dare say you 'd like to sit in your dressing-gown and slippers — you are entirely mistaken. I know what is due, not to your old partner, but to the great Mr. Stacy, the financier, and I know what is due *from him to us!* No! We dine in the great dining-room, publicly, and, if possible, at the very next table to those stuck-up Peterburys and their Eastern friends, including that horrid woman, which I 'm sure ought to satisfy you. Then you can talk as much as you like, and as loud as you like, about old times, — and the louder and the more the better, — but I don't think *he 'll* like it."

"But the baby!" expostulated Barker. "Stacy 's just wild to see him — and we can't bring him down to the table — though we *might*," he added, momentarily brightening.

"After dinner," said Mrs. Barker severely, "we will walk through the big drawing-rooms, and *then* Mr. Stacy may come upstairs and see him in his crib; but not before. And now, George, I do wish that to-night, *for once*, you would not wear a turn-down collar, and that you would go

to the barber's and have him cut your hair and smooth out the curls. And, for Heaven's sake! let him put some wax or gum or *something* on your mustache and twist it up on your cheek like Captain Heath's, for it positively droops over your mouth like a girl's ringlet. It 's quite enough for me to hear people talk of your inexperience, but really I don't want you to look as if I had run away with a pretty schoolboy. And, considering the size of that child, it 's positively disgraceful. And, one thing more, George. When I 'm talking to anybody, please don't sit opposite to me, beaming with delight, and your mouth open. And don't roar if by chance I say something funny. And — whatever you do — don't make eyes at me in company whenever I happen to allude to you, as I did before Captain Heath. It is positively too ridiculous."

Nothing could exceed the laughing good humor with which her husband received these cautions, nor the evident sincerity with which he promised amendment. Equally sincere was he, though a little more thoughtful, in his severe self-examination of his deficiencies, when, later, he seated himself at the window with one hand softly encompassing his child's chubby fist in the crib beside him, and, in the instinctive fashion of all loneliness, looked out of the window. The southern trades were whipping the waves of the distant bay and harbor into yeasty crests. Sheets of rain swept the sidewalks with the regularity of a fusillade, against which a few pedestrians struggled with flapping waterproofs and slanting umbrellas. He could look along the deserted length of Montgomery Street to the heights of Telegraph Hill and its long-disused semaphore. It seemed lonelier to him than the mile-long sweep of Heavy Tree Hill, writhing against the mountain wind and its æolian song. He had never felt so lonely *there*. In his rigid self-examination he thought Kitty right in protesting against the effect of his youthfulness and optimism. Yet he was also right in being

himself. There is an egoism in the highest simplicity; and Barker, while willing to believe in others' methods, never abandoned his own aims. He was right in loving Kitty as he did; he knew that she was better and more lovable than she could believe herself to be; but he was willing to believe it pained and discomposed her if he showed it before company. He would not have her change even this peculiarity — it was part of herself — no more than he would have changed himself. And behind what he had conceived was her clear, practical common sense, all this time had been her belief that she had deceived her father! Poor dear, dear Kitty! And she had suffered because stupid people had conceived that her father had led him away in selfish speculations. As if he — Barker — would not have first discovered it, and as if anybody — even dear Kitty herself — was responsible for *his* convictions and actions but himself. Nevertheless, this gentle egotist was unusually serious, and when the child awoke at last, and with a fretful start and vacant eyes pushed his caressing hand away, he felt lonelier than before. It was with a slight sense of humiliation, too, that he saw it stretch its hands to the mere hireling, Norah, who had never given it the love that he had seen even in the frivolous Mrs. Horncastle's eyes. Later, when his wife came in, looking very pretty in her elaborate dinner toilet, he had the same conflicting emotions. He knew that they had already passed that phase of their married life when she dressed to please him, and that the dictates of fashion or the rivalry of another woman she now held superior to his tastes; yet he did not blame her. But he was a little surprised to see that her dress was copied from one of Mrs. Horncastle's most striking ones, and that it did not suit her. That which adorned the maturer woman did not agree with the demure and slightly austere prettiness of the young wife.

But Barker forgot all this when Stacy — reserved and

somewhat severe-looking in evening dress — arrived with business punctuality. He fancied that his old partner received the announcement that they would dine in the public room with something of surprise, and he saw him glance keenly at Kitty in her fine array, as if he had suspected it was her choice, and understood her motives. Indeed, the young husband had found himself somewhat nervous in regard to Stacy's estimate of Kitty; he was conscious that she was not looking and acting like the old Kitty that Stacy had known; it did not enter his honest heart that Stacy had, perhaps, not appreciated her then, and that her present quality might accord more with his worldly tastes and experience. It was, therefore, with a kind of timid delight that he saw Stacy apparently enter into her mood, and with a still more timorous amusement to notice that he seemed to sympathize not only with her, but with her half-rallying, half-serious attitude towards his (Barker's) inexperience and simplicity. He was glad that she had made a friend of Stacy, even in this way. Stacy would understand, as he did, her pretty willfulness at last; she would understand what a true friend Stacy was to him. It was with unfeigned satisfaction that he followed them in to dinner as she leaned upon his guest's arm, chatting confidentially. He was only uneasy because her manner had a slight ostentation.

The entrance of the little party produced a quick sensation throughout the dining-room. Whispers passed from table to table; all heads were turned towards the great financier as towards a magnet; a few guests even shamelessly faced round in their chairs as he passed. Mrs. Barker was pink, pretty, and voluble with excitement; Stacy had a slight mask of reserve; Barker was the only one natural and unconscious.

As the dinner progressed, Barker found that there was little chance for him to invoke his old partner's memories of the past. He found, however, that Stacy had received

a letter from Demorest, and that he was coming home from Europe. His letters were still sad; they both agreed upon that. And then for the first time that day Stacy looked intently at Barker with the look that he had often worn on Heavy Tree Hill.

"Then you think it is the same old trouble that worries him?" said Barker in an awed and sympathetic voice.

"I believe it is," said Stacy, with an equal feeling. Mrs. Barker pricked up her pretty ears; her husband's ready sympathy was familiar enough; but that this cold, practical Stacy should be moved at anything piqued her curiosity.

"And you believe that he has never got over it?" continued Barker.

"He had one chance, but he threw it away," said Stacy energetically. "If, instead of going off to Europe by himself to brood over it, he had joined me in business, he'd have been another man."

"But not Demorest," said Barker quickly.

"What dreadful secret is this about Demorest?" said Mrs. Barker petulantly. "Is he ill?"

Both men were silent by their old common instinct. But it was Stacy who said "No" in a way that put any further questioning at an end, and Barker was grateful and for the moment disloyal to his Kitty.

It was with delight that Mrs. Barker had seen that the attention of the next table was directed to them, and that even Mrs. Horncastle had glanced from time to time at Stacy. But she was not prepared for the evident equal effect that Mrs. Horncastle had created upon Stacy. His cold face warmed, his critical eye softened; he asked her name. Mrs. Barker was voluble, prejudiced, and, it seemed, misinformed.

"I know it all," said Stacy, with didactic emphasis. "Her husband was as bad as they make them. When her life had become intolerable *with him*, he tried to make it

shameful *without him* by abandoning her. She could get a divorce a dozen times over, but she won't."

"I suppose that 's what makes her so very attractive to gentlemen," said Mrs. Barker ironically.

"I have never seen her before," continued Stacy, with business precision, "although I and two other men are guardians of her property, and have saved it from the clutches of her husband. They told me she was handsome — and so she is."

Pleased with the sudden human weakness of Stacy, Barker glanced at his wife for sympathy. But she was looking studiously another way, and the young husband's eyes, still full of his gratification, fell upon Mrs. Horncastle's. She looked away with a bright color. Whereupon the sanguine Barker — perfectly convinced that she returned Stacy's admiration — was seized with one of his old boyish dreams of the future, and saw Stacy happily united to her, and was only recalled to the dinner before him by its end. Then Stacy duly promenaded the great saloon with Mrs. Barker on his arm, visited the baby in her apartments, and took an easy leave. But he grasped Barker's hand before parting in quite his old fashion, and said, "Come to lunch with me at the bank any day, and we 'll talk of Phil Demorest," and left Barker as happy as if the appointment were to confer the favor he had that morning refused. But Mrs. Barker, who had overheard, was more dubious.

"You don't suppose he asks you to talk with you about Demorest and his stupid secret, do you ? " she said scornfully.

"Perhaps not only about that," said Barker, glad that she had not demanded the secret.

"Well," returned Mrs. Barker, as she turned away, "he might just as well lunch here and talk about *her* — and see her, too."

Meantime Stacy had dropped into his club, only a few

squares distant. His appearance created the same interest that it had produced at the hotel, but with less reserve among his fellow members.

"Have you heard the news?" said a dozen voices. Stacy had not; he had been dining out.

"That infernal swindle of a Divide Railroad has passed the legislature."

Stacy instantly remembered Barker's absurd belief in it and his reasons. He smiled and said carelessly, "Are you quite sure it 's a swindle?"

There was a dead silence at the coolness of the man who had been most outspoken against it.

"But," said a voice hesitatingly, "you know it goes nowhere and to no purpose."

"But that does not prevent it, now that it 's a fact, from going anywhere and to some purpose," said Stacy, turning away. He passed into the reading-room quietly, but in an instant turned and quickly descended by another staircase into the hall, hurriedly put on his overcoat, and slipping out, was a moment later reëntering the hotel. Here he hastily summoned Barker, who came down, flushed and excited. Laying his hand on Barker's arm in his old dominant way, he said: —

"Don't delay a single hour, but get a written agreement for that Ditch property."

Barker smiled. "But I have. Got it this afternoon."

"Then you know?" ejaculated Stacy in surprise.

"I only know," said Barker, coloring, "that you said I could back out of it if it was n't signed, and that 's what Kitty said, too. And I thought it looked awfully mean for me to hold a man to that kind of a bargain. And so — you won't be mad, old fellow, will you? — I thought I 'd put it beyond any question of my own good faith by having it in black and white." He stopped, laughing and blushing, but still earnest and sincere. "You don't think me a fool, do you?" he said pathetically.

Stacy smiled grimly. "I think, Barker boy, that if you go to the Branch you 'll have no difficulty in paying for the Ditch property. Good-night."

In a few moments he was back at the club again, before any one knew he had even left the building. As he reëntered the smoking-room he found the members still in eager discussion about the new railroad. One was saying, "If they could get an extension, and carry the road through Heavy Tree Hill to Boomville, they 'd be all right."

"I quite agree with you," said Stacy.

CHAPTER III

THE swaying, creaking, Boomville coach had at last reached the level ridge, and sank forward upon its springs with a sigh of relief and the slow precipitation of the red dust which had hung in clouds around it. The whole coach, inside and out, was covered with this impalpable powder; it had poured into the windows that gaped widely in the insufferable heat; it lay thick upon the novel read by the passenger who had for the third or fourth time during the ascent made a gutter of the half-opened book and blown the dust away in a single puff, like the smoke from a pistol. It lay in folds and creases over the yellow silk duster of the handsome woman on the back seat, and when she endeavored to shake it off enveloped her in a reddish nimbus. It grimed the handkerchiefs of others, and left sanguinary streaks on their mopped foreheads. But as the coach had slowly climbed the summit the sun was also sinking behind the Black Spur Range, and with its ultimate disappearance a delicious coolness spread itself like a wave across the ridge. The passengers drew a long breath, the reader closed his book, the lady lifted the edge of her veil and delicately wiped her forehead, over which a few damp tendrils of hair were clinging. Even a distinguished-looking man who had sat as impenetrable and remote as a statue in one of the front seats moved and turned his abstracted face to the window. His deeply tanned cheek and clearly cut features harmonized with the red dust that lay in the curves of his brown linen dust-cloak, and completed his resemblance to a bronze figure. Yet it was Demorest, changed only in coloring. Now, as five years ago, his abstraction had a certain quality which the

most familiar stranger shrank from disturbing. But in the general relaxation of relief the novel-reader addressed him.

"Well, we ain't far from Boomville now, and it's all down-grade the rest of the way. I reckon you 'll be as glad to get a 'wash up' and a 'shake' as the rest of us."

"I am afraid I won't have so early an opportunity," said Demorest, with a faint, grave smile, "for I get off at the cross-road to Heavy Tree Hill."

"Heavy Tree Hill!" repeated the other in surprise. "You ain't goin' to Heavy Tree Hill? Why, you might have gone there direct by railroad, and have been there four hours ago. You know there 's a branch from the Divide Railroad goes there straight to the hotel at Hymettus."

"Where?" said Demorest, with a puzzled smile.

"Hymettus. That 's the fancy name they 've given to the watering-place on the slope. But I reckon you 're a stranger here?"

"For five years," said Demorest. "I fancy I 've heard of the railroad, although I prefer to go to Heavy Tree this way. But I never heard of a watering-place there before."

"Why, it 's the biggest boom of the year. Folks that are tired of the fogs of 'Frisco and the heat of Sacramento all go there. It 's four thousand feet up, with a hotel like Saratoga, dancing, and a band plays every night. And it all sprang out of the Divide Railroad and a crank named George Barker, who bought up some old Ditch property and ran a branch line along its levels, and made a junction with the Divide. You can come all the way from 'Frisco or Sacramento by rail. It 's a mighty big thing!"

"Yet," said Demorest, with some animation, "you call the man who originated this success a crank. I should say he was a genius."

The other passenger shook his head. "All sheer nigger luck. He bought the Ditch plant afore there was a ghost of a chance for the Divide Railroad, just out o' pure d—d

foolishness. He expected so little from it that he had n't even got the agreement done in writin', and had n't paid for it, when the Divide Railroad passed the legislature, as it never oughter done! For, you see, the blamedest cur'ous thing about the whole affair was that this 'straw' road of a Divide, all pure wildcat, was only gotten up to frighten the Pacific Railroad sharps into buying it up. And the road that nobody ever calculated would ever have a rail of it laid was pushed on as soon as folks knew that the Ditch plant had been bought up, for they thought there was a big thing behind it. Even the hotel was, at first, simply a kind of genteel almshouse that this yer Barker had built for broken-down miners!"

"Nevertheless," continued Demorest, smiling, "you admit that it is a great success?"

"Yes," said the other, a little irritated by some complacency in Demorest's smile, "but the success is n't *his'n*. Fools has ideas, and wise men profit by them, for that hotel now has Jim Stacy's bank behind it, and is even a kind of country branch of the Brook House in 'Frisco. Barker 's out of it, I reckon. Anyhow, *he* could n't run a hotel, for all that his wife — she that 's one of the big 'Frisco swells now — used to help serve in her father's. No, sir, it 's just a fool's luck, gettin' the first taste and leavin' the rest to others."

"I 'm not sure that it 's the worst kind of luck," returned Demorest, with persistent gravity; "and I suppose he 's satisfied with it."

But so heterodox an opinion only irritated his antagonist the more, especially as he noticed that the handsome woman in the back seat appeared to be interested in the conversation, and even sympathetic with Demorest. The man was in the main a good-natured fellow and loyal to his friends; but this did not preclude any virulent criticism of others, and for a moment he hated this bronze-faced

stranger, and even saw blemishes in the handsome woman's beauty. "That may be *your* idea of an Eastern man," he said bluntly, "but I kin tell ye that Californy ain't run on those lines. No, sir." Nevertheless, his curiosity got the better of his ill humor, and as the coach at last pulled up at the cross-road for Demorest to descend, he smiled affably at his departing companion.

"You allowed just now that you'd bin five years away. Whar mout ye have bin?"

"In Europe," said Demorest pleasantly.

"I reckoned ez much," returned his interrogator, smiling significantly at the other passengers. "But in what place?"

"Oh, many," said Demorest, smiling also.

"But what place war ye last livin' at?"

"Well," said Demorest, descending the steps, but lingering for a moment with his hand on the door of the coach, "oddly enough, now you remind me of it — at Hymettus!"

He closed the door, and the coach rolled on. The passenger reddened, glanced indignantly after the departing figure of Demorest and suspiciously at the others. The lady was looking from the window with a faint smile on her face.

"He might hev given me a civil answer," muttered the passenger, and resumed his novel.

When the coach drew up before Carter's Hotel the lady got down, and the curiosity of her susceptible companions was gratified to the extent of learning from the register that her name was Horncastle.

She was shown to a private sitting-room, which chanced to be the one which had belonged to Mrs. Barker in the days of her maidenhood, and was the sacred, impenetrable bower to which she retired when her daily duties of waiting upon her father's guests were over. But the breath of custom had passed through it since then, and but little remained of its former maiden glories, except a few school-

girl crayon drawings on the wall and an unrecognizable portrait of herself in oil, done by a wandering artist and still preserved as a receipt for his unpaid bill. Of these facts Mrs. Horncastle knew nothing; she was evidently preoccupied, and after she had removed her outer duster and entered the room, she glanced at the clock on the mantel-shelf and threw herself with an air of resigned abstraction in an armchair in the corner. Her traveling-dress, although unostentatious, was tasteful and well-fitting; a slight pallor from her fatiguing journey, and, perhaps, from some absorbing thought, made her beauty still more striking. She gave even an air of elegance to the faded, worn adornments of the room, which it is to be feared it never possessed in Miss Kitty's occupancy. Again she glanced at the clock. There was a tap at the door.

"Come in."

The door opened to a Chinese servant bearing a piece of torn paper with a name written on it in lieu of a card.

Mrs. Horncastle took it, glanced at the name, and handed the paper back.

"There must be some mistake," she said. "I do not know Mr. Steptoe."

"No, but you know *me*, all the same," said a voice from the doorway as a man entered, coolly took the Chinese servant by the elbows and thrust him into the passage, closing the door upon him. "Steptoe and Horncastle are the same man, only I prefer to call myself Steptoe *here*. And I see *you* 're down on the register as 'Horncastle.' Well it 's plucky of you, and it 's not a bad name to keep; you might be thankful that I have always left it to you. And if I call myself Steptoe here, it 's a good blind against any of your swell friends knowing you met your *husband* here."

In the half-scornful, half-resigned look she had given him when he entered there was no doubt that she recognized him as the man she had come to see. He had changed

little in the five years that had elapsed since he entered the three partners' cabin at Heavy Tree Hill. His short hair and beard still clung to his head like curled moss or the crisp flocculence of Astrakhan. He was dressed more pretentiously, but still gave the same idea of vulgar strength. She listened to him without emotion, but said, with even a deepening of scorn in her manner: —

"What new shame is this?"

"Nothing *new*," he replied. "Only five years ago I was livin' over on the Bar at Heavy Tree Hill under the name of Steptoe, and folks here might recognize me. I was here when your particular friend, Jim Stacy, who only knew me as Steptoe, and does n't know me as Horncastle, your *husband*, — for all he 's bound up my property for you, — made his big strike with his two partners. I was in his cabin that very night, and drank his whiskey. Oh, I 'm all right there! I left everything all right behind me — only it 's just as well he does n't know I 'm Horncastle. And as the boy happened to be there with me" — He stopped, and looked at her significantly.

The expression of her face changed. Eagerness, anxiety, and even fear came into it in turn, but always mingling with some scorn that dominated her. "The boy!" she said in a voice that had changed too; "well, what about him? You promised to tell me all — all!"

"Where 's the money?" he said. "Husband and wife are *one*, I know," he went on, with a coarse laugh, "but I don't trust *myself* in these matters."

She took from a traveling-reticule that lay beside her a roll of notes and a chamois leather bag of coin, and laid them on the table before him. He examined both carefully.

"All right," he said. "I see you 've got the checks made out 'to bearer.' Your head 's level, Conny. Pity you and me can't agree."

"I went to the bank across the way as soon as I arrived," she said, with contemptuous directness. "I told them I was going over to Hymettus and might want money."

He dropped into a chair before her with his broad, heavy hands upon his knees, and looked at her with an equal, though baser, contempt; for his was mingled with a certain pride of mastery and possession.

"And, of course, you 'll go to Hymettus and cut a splurge as you always do. The beautiful Mrs. Horncastle! The helpless victim of a wretched, dissipated, disgraced, gambling husband. So dreadfully sad, you know, and so interesting! Could get a divorce from the brute if she wanted, but won't, on account of her religious scruples. And so while the brute is gambling, swindling, disgracing himself, and dodging a shot here and a lynch committee there, two or three hundred miles away, you 're splurging round in first-class hotels and watering-places, doing the injured and abused, and run after by a lot of men who are ready to take my place, and, maybe, some of my reputation along with it."

"Stop!" she said suddenly, in a voice that made the glass chandelier ring. He had risen too, with a quick, uneasy glance towards the door. But her outbreak passed as suddenly, and sinking back into her chair, she said, with her previous scornful resignation, "Never mind. Go on. You *know* you 're lying!"

He sat down again and looked at her critically. "Yes, as far as you 're concerned I *was* lying! I know your style. But as you know, too, that I 'd kill you and the first man I suspected, and there ain't a judge or a jury in all Californy that would n't let me go free for it, and even consider, too, that it had wiped off the whole slate agin me — it 's to my credit!"

"I know what you men call chivalry," she said coldly, "but I did not come here to buy a knowledge of that. So

now about the child?" she ended abruptly, leaning forward again with the same look of eager solicitude in her eyes.

"Well, about the child — our child — though, perhaps, I prefer to say *my* child," he began, with a certain brutal frankness. "I'll tell you. But first, I don't want you to talk about *buying* your information of me. If I have n't told you anything before, it's because I did n't think you oughter know. If I did n't trust the child to *you*, it's because I did n't think you could go shashaying about with a child that was three years old when I" — he stopped and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand — "made an honest woman of you — I think that's what they call it."

"But," she said eagerly, ignoring the insult, "I could have hidden it where no one but myself would have known it. I could have sent it to school and visited it as a relation."

"Yes," he said curtly, "like all women, and then blurted it out some day and made it worse."

"But," she said desperately, "even *then*, suppose I had been willing to take the shame of it! I have taken more!"

"But I did n't intend that you should," he said roughly.

"You are very careful of my reputation," she returned scornfully.

"Not by a d—d sight," he burst out; "but I care for *his!* I'm not goin' to let any man call him a bastard!"

Callous as she had become even under this last cruel blow, she could not but see something in his coarse eyes she had never seen before; could not but hear something in his brutal voice she had never heard before! Was it possible that somewhere in the depths of his sordid nature he had his own contemptible sense of honor? A hysterical feeling came over her hitherto passive disgust and scorn, but it disappeared with his next sentence in a haze of anxiety. "No!" he said hoarsely, "he had enough wrong done him already."

"What do you mean?" she said imploringly. "Or are

you again lying? You said, four years ago, that he had 'got into trouble;' that was your excuse for keeping him from me. Or was that a lie, too?"

His manner changed and softened, but not for any pity for his companion, but rather from some change in his own feelings. "Oh, *that*," he said, with a rough laugh, "that was only a kind o' trouble any sassy kid like him was likely to get into. You ain't got no call to hear that, for," he added, with a momentary return to his previous manner, "the wrong that was done him is *my* lookout! You want to know what I did with him, how he's been looked arter, and where he is? You want the worth of your money. That's square enough. But first I want you to know, though you may n't believe it, that every red cent you've given me to-night goes to *him*. And don't you forget it."

For all his vulgar frankness she knew he had lied to her many times before, — maliciously, wantonly, complacently, but never evasively; yet there was again that something in his manner which told her he was now telling the truth.

"Well," he began, settling himself back in his chair, "I told you I brought him to Heavy Tree Hill. After I left you I was n't going to trust him to no school; he knew enough for me; but when I left those parts where nobody knew you, and got a little nearer 'Frisco, where people might have known us both, I thought it better not to travel round with a kid o' that size as his *father*. So I got a young fellow here to pass him off as *his* little brother, and look after him and board him; and I paid him a big price for it, too, you bet! You would n't think it was a man who's now swelling around here, the top o' the pile, that ever took money from a brute like me, and for such schoolmaster work, too; but he did, and his name was Van Loo, a clerk of the Ditch Company."

"Van Loo!" said the woman, with a movement of disgust; "*that* man!"

"What's the matter with Van Loo?" he said, with a coarse laugh, enjoying his wife's discomfiture. "He speaks French and Spanish, and you oughter hear the kid roll off the lingo he's got from him. He's got style, and knows how to dress, and you oughter see the kid bow and scrape, and how he carries himself. Now, Van Loo was n't exactly my style, and I reckon I don't hanker after him much, but he served my purpose."

"And this man knows"— she said, with a shudder.

"He knows Steptoe and the boy, but he don't know Horncastle nor *you*. Don't you be skeert. He's the last man in the world who would hanker to see me or the kid again, or would dare to say that he ever had! Lord! I'd like to see his fastidious mug if me and Eddy walked in upon him and his high-toned mother and sister some arternoon." He threw himself back and laughed a derisive, spasmodic, choking laugh, which was so far from being genial that it even seemed to indicate a lively appreciation of pain in others rather than of pleasure in himself. He had often laughed at her in the same way.

"And where is he now?" she said, with a compressed lip.

"At school. Where, I don't tell you. You know why. But he's looked after by me, and d—d well looked after, too."

She hesitated, composed her face with an effort, parted her lips, and looked out of the window into the gathering darkness. Then after a moment she said slowly, yet with a certain precision: —

"And his mother? Do you ever talk to him of *her?* Does — does he ever speak of *me?*"

"What do you think?" he said comfortably, changing his position in the chair, and trying to read her face in the shadow. "Come, now. You don't know, eh? Well — no! *No!* You understand. No! He's *my* friend —

mine! He 's stood by me through thick and thin. Run at my heels when everybody else fled me. Dodged vigilance committees with me, laid out in the brush with me with his hand in mine when the sheriff's deputies were huntin' me; shut his jaw close when, if he squealed, he 'd have been called another victim of the brute Horncastle, and been as petted and canoodled as you."

It would have been difficult for any one but the woman who knew the man before her to have separated his brutish delight in paining her from another feeling she had never dreamt him capable of, — an intense and fierce pride in his affection for his child. And it was the more hopeless to her that it was not the mere sentiment of reciprocation, but the material instinct of paternity in its most animal form. And it seemed horrible to her that the only outcome of what had been her own wild, youthful passion for this brute was this love for the flesh of her flesh, for she was more and more conscious as he spoke that her yearning for the boy was the yearning of an equally dumb and unreasoning maternity. They had met again as animals — in fear, contempt, and anger of each other; but the animal had triumphed in both.

When she spoke again it was as the woman of the world, — the woman who had laughed two years ago at the irrepressible Barker. "It 's a new thing," she said, languidly turning her rings on her fingers, "to see you in the rôle of a doting father. And may I ask how long you have had this amiable weakness, and how long it is to last?"

To her surprise and the keen retaliating delight of her sex, a conscious flush covered his face to the crisp edges of his black and matted beard. For a moment she hoped that he had lied. But, to her greater surprise, he stammered in equal frankness: "It 's growed upon me for the last five years — ever since I was alone with him." He stopped, cleared his throat, and then, standing up before

her, said in his former voice, but with a more settled and intense deliberation: "You wanter know how long it will last, do ye? Well, you know your special friend, Jim Stacy — the big millionaire — the great Jim of the Stock Exchange — the man that pinches the money market of Californy between his finger and thumb and makes it squeal in New York — the man who shakes the stock market when he sneezes? Well, it will go on until that man is a beggar; until he has to borrow a dime for his breakfast, and slump out of his lunch with a cent's worth of rat poison or a bullet in his head! It 'll go on until his old partner — that softy George Barker — comes to the bottom of his d—d fool luck and is a penny-a-liner for the papers and a hanger-round at free lunches, and his scatter-brained wife runs away with another man! It 'll go on until the high-toned Demorest, the last of those three little tin gods of Heavy Tree Hill, will have to climb down, and will know what *I* feel and what he 's made me feel, and will wish himself in hell before he ever made the big strike on Heavy Tree! That 's me! You hear me! I 'm shoutin'! It 'll last till then! It may be next week, next month, next year. But it 'll come. And when it does come you 'll see me and Eddy just waltzin' in and takin' the chief seats in the synagogue! And you 'll have a free pass to the show!"

Either he was too intoxicated with his vengeful vision, or the shadows of the room had deepened, but he did not see the quick flush that had risen to his wife's face with this allusion to Barker, nor the after-settling of her handsome features into a dogged determination equal to his own. His blind fury against the three partners did not touch her curiosity; she was only struck with the evident depth of his emotion. He had never been a braggart; his hostility had always been lazy and cynical. Remembering this, she had a faint stirring of respect for the undoubted

courage and consciousness of strength shown in this wild but single-handed crusade against wealth and power; rather, perhaps, it seemed to her to condone her own weakness in her youthful and inexplicable passion for him. No wonder she had submitted.

"Then you have nothing more to tell me?" she said after a pause, rising and going towards the mantel.

"You need n't light up for me," he returned, rising also. "I am going. Unless," he added, with his coarse laugh, "you think it would n't look well for Mrs. Horncastle to have been sitting in the dark with — a stranger!" He paused as she contemptuously put down the candlestick and threw the unlit match into the grate. "No, I've nothing more to tell. He 's a fancy-looking pup. You 'd take him for twenty-one, though he 's only sixteen — clean-limbed and perfect — but for one thing" — He stopped. He met her quick look of interrogation, however, with a lowering silence that, nevertheless, changed again as he surveyed her erect figure by the faint light of the window with a sardonic smile. "He favors you, I think, and in all but one thing, too."

"And that?" she queried coldly, as he seemed to hesitate.

"He ain't ashamed of *me*," he returned, with a laugh.

The door closed behind him; she heard his heavy step descend the creaking stairs; he was gone. She went to the window and threw it open, as if to get rid of the atmosphere charged with his presence, — a presence still so potent that she now knew that for the last five minutes she had been, to her horror, struggling against its magnetism. She even recoiled now at the thought of her child, as if, in these new confidences over it, it had revived the old intimacy in this link of their common flesh. She looked down from her window on the square shoulders, thick throat, and crisp matted hair of her husband as he vanished in

the darkness, and drew a breath of freedom, — a freedom not so much from him as from her own weakness that he was bearing away with him into the exonerating night.

She shut the window and sank down in her chair again, but in the encompassing and compassionate obscurity of the room. And this was the man she had loved and for whom she had wrecked her young life! Or *was* it love? and, if *not*, how was she better than he? Worse; for he was more loyal to that passion that had brought them together and its responsibilities than she was. She had suffered the perils and pangs of maternity, and yet had only the mere animal yearning for her offspring, while he had taken over the toil and duty, and even the devotion, of parentage himself. But then she remembered also how he had fascinated her — a simple schoolgirl — by his sheer domineering strength, and how the objections of her parents to this coarse and common man had forced her into a clandestine intimacy that ended in her complete subjection to him. She remembered the birth of an infant whose concealment from her parents and friends was compassed by his low cunning; she remembered the late atonement of marriage preferred by the man she had already begun to loathe and fear, and who she now believed was eager only for her inheritance. She remembered her abject compliance through the greater fear of the world, the stormy scenes that followed their ill-omened union, her final abandonment of her husband, and the efforts of her friends and family, who had rescued the last of her property from him. She was glad she remembered it; she dwelt upon it, upon his cruelty, his coarseness and vulgarity, until she saw, as she honestly believed, the hidden springs of his affection for their child. It was *his* child in nature, however it might have favored her in looks; it was *his* own brutal *self* he was worshiping in his brutal progeny. How else could it have ignored *her* — its own mother? She never

doubted the truth of what he had told her — she had seen it in his own triumphant eyes. And yet she would have made a kind mother; she remembered with a smile and a slight rising of color the affection of Barker's baby for her; she remembered with a deepening of that color the thrill of satisfaction she had felt in her husband's fulmination against Mrs. Barker, and, more than all, she felt in his blind and foolish hatred of Barker himself a delicious condonation of the strange feeling that had sprung up in her heart for Barker's simple, straightforward nature. How could *he* understand, how could *they* understand (by the plural she meant Mrs. Barker and Horncastle), a character so innately noble. In her strange attraction towards him she had felt a charming sense of what she believed was a superior and even matronly protection; in the utter isolation of her life now — and with her husband's foolish abuse of him ringing in her ears — it seemed a sacred duty. She had lost a son. Providence had sent her an ideal friend to replace him. And this was quite consistent, too, with a faint smile that began to play about her mouth as she recalled some instances of Barker's delightful and irresistible youthfulness.

There was a clatter of hoofs and the sound of many voices from the street. Mrs. Horncastle knew it was the down coach changing horses; it would be off again in a few moments, and, no doubt, bearing her husband away with it. A new feeling of relief came over her as she at last heard the warning "All aboard!" and the great vehicle clattered and rolled into the darkness, trailing its burning lights across her walls and ceiling. But now she heard steps on the staircase, a pause before her room, a whisper of voices, the opening of the door, the rustle of a skirt, and a little feminine cry of protest as a man apparently tried to follow the figure into the room. "No, no! I tell you *no!*" remonstrated the woman's voice in a hurried whis-

per. "It won't do. Everybody knows me here. You must not come in now. You must wait to be announced by the servant. Hush! Go!"

There was a slight struggle, the sound of a kiss, and the woman succeeded in finally shutting the door. Then she walked slowly, but with a certain familiarity towards the mantel, struck a match, and lit the candle. The light shone upon the bright eyes and slightly flushed face of Mrs. Barker. But the motionless woman in the chair had recognized her voice and the voice of her companion at once. And then their eyes met.

Mrs. Barker drew back, but did not utter a cry. Mrs. Horncastle, with eyes even brighter than her companion's, smiled. The red deepened in Mrs. Barker's cheek.

"This is my room!" she said indignantly, with a sweeping gesture around the walls.

"I should judge so," said Mrs. Horncastle, following the gesture; "but," she added quietly, "they put *me* into it. It appears, however, they did not expect you."

Mrs. Barker saw her mistake. "No, no," she said apologetically, "of course not." Then she added, with nervous volubility, sitting down and tugging at her gloves, "You see, I just ran down from Marysville to take a look at my father's old house on my way to Hymettus. I hope I have n't disturbed you. Perhaps," she said, with sudden eagerness, "you were asleep when I came in!"

"No," said Mrs. Horncastle, "I was not sleeping nor dreaming. I heard you come in."

"Some of these men are such idiots," said Mrs. Barker, with a half-hysterical laugh. "They seem to think if a woman accepts the least courtesy from them they 've a right to be familiar. But I fancy that fellow was a little astonished when I shut the door in his face."

"I fancy he *was*," returned Mrs. Horncastle dryly. "But I should n't call Mr. Van Loo an idiot. He has the reputation of being a cautious business man."

Mrs. Barker bit her lip. Her companion had been recognized. She rose with a slight flirt of her skirt. "I suppose I must go and get a room; there was nobody in the office when I came. Everything is badly managed here since my father took away the best servants to Hymettus." She moved with affected carelessness towards the door when Mrs. Horncastle, without rising from her seat, said: —

"Why not stay here?"

Mrs. Barker brightened for a moment. "Oh," she said, with polite deprecation, "I could n't think of turning you out."

"I don't intend you shall," said Mrs. Horncastle. "We will stay here together until you go with me to Hymettus, or until Mr. Van Loo leaves the hotel. He will hardly attempt to come in here again if I remain."

Mrs. Barker, with a half-laugh, sat down irresolutely. Mrs. Horncastle gazed at her curiously; she was evidently a novice in this sort of thing. But, strange to say, — and I leave the ethics of this for the sex to settle, — the fact did not soften Mrs. Horncastle's heart, nor in the least qualify her attitude towards the younger woman. After an awkward pause Mrs. Barker rose again. "Well, it 's very good of you, and — and — I 'll just run out and wash my hands and get the dust off me, and come back."

"No, Mrs. Barker," said Mrs. Horncastle, rising and approaching her, "you will first wash your hands of this Mr. Van Loo, and get some of the dust of the rendezvous off you before you do anything else. You *can* do it by simply telling him, *should you meet him in the hall*, that I was sitting here when he came in, and heard *everything!* Depend upon it, he won't trouble you again."

But Mrs. Barker, though inexperienced in love, was a good fighter. The best of the sex are. She dropped into the rocking-chair, and began rocking backwards and forwards while still tugging at her gloves, and said, in a

gradually warming voice, "I certainly shall not magnify Mr. Van Loo's silliness to that importance. And I have yet to learn what you mean by talking about a rendezvous! And I want to know," she continued, suddenly stopping her rocking and tilting the rockers impertinently behind her, as, with her elbows squared on the chair arms, she tilted her own face defiantly up into Mrs. Horncastle's, "how a woman in your position — who does n't live with her husband — dares to talk to *me!*"

There was a lull before the storm. Mrs. Horncastle approached nearer, and, laying her hand on the back of the chair, leaned over her, and with a white face and a metallic ring in her voice, said: "It is just because I am a woman *in my position* that I do! It is because I don't live with my husband that I can tell you what it will be when you no longer live with yours — which will be the inevitable result of what you are now doing. It is because I *was* in this position that the very man who is pursuing you, because he thinks you are discontented with *your* husband, once thought he could pursue me because I had left *mine.* You are here with him alone, without the knowledge of your husband; call it folly, caprice, vanity, or what you like, it can have but one end — to put you in my place at last, to be considered the fair game afterwards for any man who may succeed him. You can test him and the truth of what I say by telling him now that I heard all."

"Suppose he does n't care what you have heard," said Mrs. Barker sharply. "Suppose he says nobody would believe you, if 'telling' is your game. Suppose he is a friend of my husband and he thinks him a much better guardian of my reputation than a woman like you. Suppose he should be the first one to tell my husband of the foul slander invented by you!"

For an instant Mrs. Horncastle was taken aback by the audacity of the woman before her. She knew the simple

confidence and boyish trust of Barker in his wife in spite of their sometimes strained relations, and she knew how difficult it would be to shake it. And she had no idea of betraying Mrs. Barker's secret to him, though she had made this scene in his interest. She had wished to save Mrs. Barker from a compromising situation, even if there was a certain vindictiveness in her exposing her to herself. Yet she knew it was quite possible now, if Mrs. Barker had immediate access to her husband, that she would convince him of her perfect innocence. Nevertheless, she had still great confidence in Van Loo's fear of scandal and his utter unmanliness. She knew he was not in love with Mrs. Barker, and this puzzled her when she considered the evident risk he was running now. Her face, however, betrayed nothing. She drew back from Mrs. Barker, and, with an indifferent and graceful gesture towards the door, said, as she leaned against the mantel, "Go, then, and see this much-abused gentleman, and then go together with him and make peace with your husband — even on those terms. If I have saved you from the consequences of your folly, I shall be willing to bear even *his* blame."

"Whatever I do," said Mrs. Barker, rising hotly, "I shall not stay here any longer to be insulted." She flounced out of the room and swept down the staircase into the office. Here she found an overworked clerk, and with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes wanted to know why in her own father's hotel she had found her own sitting-room engaged, and had been obliged to wait half an hour before she could be shown into a decent apartment to remove her hat and cloak in; and how it was that even the gentleman who had kindly escorted her had evidently been unable to procure her any assistance. She said this in a somewhat high voice, which might have reached the ears of that gentleman had he been in the vicinity. But he was not, and she was forced to meet the somewhat dazed apologies of the clerk alone, and

to accompany the chambermaid to a room only a few paces distant from the one she had quitted. Here she hastily removed her outer duster and hat, washed her hands, and consulted her excited face in the mirror, with the door ajar and an ear sensitively attuned to any step in the corridor. But all this was effected so rapidly that she was at last obliged to sit down in a chair near the half-opened door, and wait. She waited five minutes — ten — but still no footstep. Then she went out into the corridor and listened, and then, smoothing her face, she slipped downstairs, past the door of that hateful room, and reappeared before the clerk with a smiling but somewhat pale and languid face. She had found the room very comfortable, but it was doubtful whether she would stay overnight or go on to Hymettus. Had anybody been inquiring for her? She expected to meet friends. No! And her escort — the gentleman who came with her — was possibly in the billiard-room or the bar?

"Oh, no! He was gone," said the clerk.

"Gone!" echoed Mrs. Barker. "Impossible! He was — he was here only a moment ago."

The clerk rang a bell sharply. The stableman appeared.

"That tall, smooth-faced man, in a high hat, who came with the lady," said the clerk severely and concisely, — "did n't you tell me he was gone?"

"Yes, sir," said the stableman.

"Are you sure?" interrupted Mrs. Barker, with a dazzling smile that, however, masked a sudden tightening round her heart.

"Quite sure, miss," said the stableman, "for he was in the yard when Steptoe came, after missing the coach. He wanted a buggy to take him over to the Divide. We had n't one, so he went over to the other stables, and he did n't come back, so I reckon he 's gone. I remember it, because Steptoe came by a minute after he 'd gone, in

another buggy, and as he was going to the Divide, too, I wondered why the gentleman had n't gone with him."

"And he left no message for me? He said nothing?" asked Mrs. Barker, quite breathless, but still smiling.

"He said nothin' to me but 'Is n't that Steptoe over there?' when Steptoe came in. And I remember he said it kinder suddent — as if he was reminded o' suthin' he 'd forgot; and then he asked for a buggy. Ye see, miss," added the man, with a certain rough consideration for her disappointment, "that 's mebbe why he clean forgot to leave a message."

Mrs. Barker turned away, and ascended the stairs. Selfishness is quick to recognize selfishness, and she saw in a flash the reason of Van Loo's abandonment of her. Some fear of discovery had alarmed him; perhaps Steptoe knew her husband; perhaps he had heard of Mrs. Horncastle's possession of the sitting-room; perhaps — for she had not seen him since their playful struggle at the door — he had recognized the woman who was there, and the selfish coward had run away. Yes; Mrs. Horncastle was right: she had been only a miserable dupe.

Her cheeks blazed as she entered the room she had just quitted, and threw herself in a chair by the window. She bit her lip as she remembered how for the last three months she had been slowly yielding to Van Loo's cautious but insinuating solicitation, from a flirtation in the San Francisco hotel to a clandestine meeting in the street; from a ride in the suburbs to a supper in a fast restaurant after the theatre. Other women did it who were fashionable and rich, as Van Loo had pointed out to her. Other fashionable women also gambled in stocks, and had their private broker in a "Charley" or a "Jack." Why should not Mrs. Barker have business with a "Paul" Van Loo, particularly as this fast craze permitted secret meetings? — for business of this kind could not be conducted in public, and permitted

the fair gambler to call at private offices without fear and without reproach. Mrs. Barker's vanity, Mrs. Barker's love of ceremony and form, Mrs. Barker's snobbishness, were flattered by the attentions of this polished gentleman with a foreign name, which even had the flavor of nobility, who never picked up her fan and handed it to her without bowing, and always rose when she entered the room. Mrs. Barker's scant schoolgirl knowledge was touched by this gentleman, who spoke French fluently, and delicately explained to her the libretto of a risky opéra bouffe. And now she had finally yielded to a meeting out of San Francisco — and an ostensible visit — still as a speculator — to one or two mining districts — with *her broker*. This was the boldest of her steps — an original idea of the fashionable Van Loo — which, no doubt, in time would become a craze, too. But it was a long step — and there was a streak of rustic decorum in Mrs. Barker's nature — the instinct that made Kitty Carter keep a perfectly secluded and distinct sitting-room in the days when she served her father's guests — that now had impelled her to make it a proviso that the first step of her journey should be from her old home in her father's hotel. It was this instinct of the proprieties that had revived in her suddenly at the door of the old sitting-room.

Then a new phase of the situation flashed upon her. It was hard for her vanity to accept Van Loo's desertion as voluntary and final. What if that hateful woman had lured him away by some trick or artfully designed message? She was capable of such meanness to insure the fulfillment of her prophecy. Or, more dreadful thought, what if she had some hold on his affections — she had said that he had pursued her; or, more infamous still, there were some secret understanding between them, and that she — Mrs. Barker — was the dupe of them both! What was she doing in the hotel at such a moment? What was her

story of going to Hymettus but a lie as transparent as her own? The tortures of jealousy, which is as often the incentive as it is the result of passion, began to rack her. She had probably yet known no real passion for this man; but with the thought of his abandoning her, and the conception of his faithlessness, came the wish to hold and keep him that was dangerously near it. What if he were even then in that room, the room where she had said she would not stay to be insulted, and they, thus secured against her intrusion, were laughing at her now? She half rose at the thought, but a sound of a horse's hoofs in the stableyard arrested her. She ran to the window which gave upon it, and, crouching down beside it, listened eagerly. The clatter of hoofs ceased; the stableman was talking to some one; suddenly she heard the stableman say, "Mrs. Barker is here." Her heart leaped, — Van Loo had returned.

But here the voice of the other man which she had not yet heard arose for the first time clear and distinct. "Are you quite sure? I did n't know she left San Francisco."

The room reeled around her. The voice was George Barker's, her husband! "Very well," he continued. "You need n't put up my horse for the night. I may take her back a little later in the buggy."

In another moment she had swept down the passage, and burst into the other room. Mrs. Horncastle was sitting by the table with a book in her hand. She started as the half-maddened woman closed the door, locked it behind her, and cast herself on her knees at her feet.

"My husband is here," she gasped. "What shall I do? In Heaven's name help me!"

"Is Van Loo still here?" said Mrs. Horncastle quickly.

"No; gone. He went when I came."

Mrs. Horncastle caught her hand and looked intently into her frightened face. "Then what have you to fear from your husband?" she said abruptly.

"You don't understand. He did n't know I was here. He thought me in San Francisco."

"Does he know it now?"

"Yes. I heard the stableman tell him. Could n't you say I came here with you; that we were here together; that it was just a little freak of ours? Oh, do!"

Mrs. Horncastle thought a moment. "Yes," she said, "we 'll see him here together."

"Oh, no! no!" said Mrs. Barker suddenly, clinging to her dress and looking fearfully towards the door. "I could n't, *could* n't see him now. Say I 'm sick, tired out, gone to my room."

"But you 'll have to see him later," said Mrs. Horncastle wonderingly.

"Yes, but he may go first. I heard him tell them not to put up his horse."

"Good!" said Mrs. Horncastle suddenly. "Go to your room and lock the door, and I 'll come to you later. Stop! Would Mr. Barker be likely to disturb you if I told him you would like to be alone?"

"No, he never does. I often tell him that."

Mrs. Horncastle smiled faintly. "Come, quick, then," she said, "for he may come *here* first."

Opening the door, she passed into the half-dark and empty hall. "Now run!" She heard the quick rustle of Mrs. Barker's skirt die away in the distance, the opening and shutting of a door — silence — and then turned back into her own room.

She was none too soon. Presently she heard Barker's voice saying, "Thank you, I can find the way," his still buoyant step on the staircase, and then saw his brown curls rising above the railing. The light streaming through the open door of the sitting-room into the half-lit hall had partially dazzled him, and, already bewildered, he was still more dazzled at the unexpected apparition of the smiling

face and bright eyes of Mrs. Horncastle standing in the doorway.

"You have fairly caught us," she said, with charming composure; "but I had half a mind to let you wander round the hotel a little longer. Come in." Barker followed her in mechanically, and she closed the door. "Now, sit down," she said gayly, "and tell me how you knew we were here, and what you mean by surprising us at this hour."

Barker's ready color always rose on meeting Mrs. Horncastle, for whom he entertained a respectful admiration, not without some fear of her worldly superiority. He flushed, bowed, and stared somewhat blankly around the room, at the familiar walls, at the chair from which Mrs. Horncastle had just risen, and finally at his wife's glove, which Mrs. Horncastle had a moment before ostentatiously thrown on the table. Seeing which, she pounced upon it with assumed archness, and pretended to conceal it.

"I had no idea my wife was here," he said at last, "and I was quite surprised when the man told me, for she had not written to me about it." As his face was brightening, she for the first time noticed that his frank gray eyes had an abstracted look, and there was a faint line of contraction on his youthful forehead. "Still less," he added, "did I look for the pleasure of meeting you. For I only came here to inquire about my old partner, Demorest, who arrived from Europe a few days ago, and who should have reached Hymettus early this afternoon. But now I hear he came all the way by coach instead of by rail, and got off at the cross-road, and we must have passed each other on the different trails. So my journey would have gone for nothing, only that I now shall have the pleasure of going back with you and Kitty. It will be a lovely drive by moonlight."

Relieved by this revelation, it was easy work for Mrs. Horncastle to launch out into a playful, tantalizing, witty

— but, I grieve to say, entirely imaginative — account of her escapade with Mrs. Barker. How, left alone at the San Francisco hotel while their gentlemen friends were enjoying themselves at Hymettus, they resolved upon a little trip, partly for the purpose of looking into some small investments of their own, and partly for the fun of the thing. What funny experiences they had! How, in particular, one horrid inquisitive, vulgar wretch had been boring a European fellow passenger who was going to Hymettus, finally asking him where he had come from last, and when he answered "Hymettus," thought the man was insulting him —

"But," interrupted the laughing Barker, "that passenger may have been Demorest, who has just come from Greece, and surely Kitty would have recognized him."

Mrs. Horncastle instantly saw her blunder, and not only retrieved it, but turned it to account. Ah, yes! but by that time poor Kitty, unused to long journeys and the heat, was utterly fagged out, was asleep, and perfectly unrecognizable in veils and dusters on the back seat of the coach. And this brought her to the point — which was, that she was sorry to say, on arriving, the poor child was nearly wild with a headache from fatigue and had gone to bed, and she had promised not to disturb her.

The undisguised amusement, mingled with relief, that had overspread Barker's face during this lively recital might have pricked the conscience of Mrs. Horncastle, but for some reason I fear it did not. But it emboldened her to go on. "I said I promised her that I would see she was n't disturbed; but, of course, now that *you*, her *husband*, have come, if" —

"Not for worlds," interrupted Barker earnestly. "I know poor Kitty's headaches, and I never disturb her, poor child, except when I 'm thoughtless." And here one of the most thoughtful men in the world in his sensitive

consideration of others beamed at her with such frank and wonderful eyes that the arch hypocrite before him with difficulty suppressed a hysterical desire to laugh, and felt the conscious blood flush her to the roots of her hair. "You know," he went on, with a sigh, half of relief and half of reminiscence, "that I often think I 'm a great bother to a clear-headed, sensible girl like Kitty. She knows people so much better than I do. She 's wonderfully equipped for the world, and, you see, I 'm only 'lucky,' as everybody says, and I dare say part of my luck was to have got her. I 'm very glad she 's a friend of yours, you know, for somehow I fancied always that you were not interested in her, or that you did n't understand each other, until now. It 's odd that nice women don't always like nice women, is n't it? I 'm glad she was with you; I was quite startled to learn she was here, and could n't make it out. I thought at first she might have got anxious about our little Sta, who is with me and the nurse at Hymettus. But I 'm glad it was only a lark. I should n't wonder," he added, with a laugh, "although she always declares she is n't one of those 'doting idiotic mothers,' that she found it a little dull without the boy, for all she thought it was better for *me* to take him somewhere for a change of air."

The situation was becoming more difficult for Mrs. Horncastle than she had conceived. There had been a certain excitement in its first direct appeal to her tact and courage, and even, she believed, an unselfish desire to save the relations between husband and wife if she could. But she had not calculated upon his unconscious revelations, nor upon their effect upon herself. She had concluded to believe that Kitty had, in a moment of folly, lent herself to this harebrained escapade, but it now might be possible that it had been deliberately planned. Kitty had sent her husband and child away three weeks *before*. Had she told the whole truth? How long had this been going on?

And if the soulless Van Loo had deserted her now, was it not, perhaps, the miserable ending of an intrigue rather than its beginning? Had she been as great a dupe of this woman as the husband before her? A new and double consciousness came over her that for a moment prevented her from meeting his honest eyes. She felt the shame of being an accomplice mingled with a fierce joy at the idea of a climax that might separate him from his wife forever.

Luckily he did not notice it, but with a continued sense of relief threw himself back in his chair, and glancing familiarly round the walls broke into his youthful laugh. "Lord! how I remember this room in the old days. It was Kitty's own private sitting-room, you know, and I used to think it looked just as fresh and pretty as she. I used to think her crayon drawing wonderful, and still more wonderful that she should have that unnecessary talent when it was quite enough for her to be just 'Kitty.' You know, don't you, how you feel at those times when you 're quite happy in being inferior" — He stopped a moment with a sudden recollection that Mrs. Horncastle's marriage had been notoriously unhappy. "I mean," he went on, with a shy little laugh and an innocent attempt at gallantry which the very directness of his simple nature made atrociously obvious, — "I mean what you 've made lots of young fellows feel. There used to be a picture of Colonel Brigg on the mantelpiece, in full uniform, and signed by himself 'For Kitty;' and Lord! how jealous I was of it, for Kitty never took presents from gentlemen, and nobody ever was allowed in here, though she helped her father all over the hotel. She was awfully strict in those days," he interpolated, with a thoughtful look and a half-sigh; "but then she was n't married. I proposed to her in this very room! Lord! I remember how frightened I was." He stopped for an instant, and then said with a certain timidity, "Do you mind my telling you something about it?"

Mrs. Horncastle was hardly prepared to hear these ingenuous domestic details, but she smiled vaguely, although she could not suppress a somewhat impatient movement with her hands. Even Barker noticed it, but to her surprise moved a little nearer to her, and in a half-entreating way said, "I hope I don't bore you, but it's something confidential. Do you know that she first *refused* me?"

Mrs. Horncastle smiled, but could not resist a slight toss of her head. "I believe they all do when they are sure of a man."

"No!" said Barker eagerly, "you don't understand. I proposed to her because I thought I was rich. In a foolish moment I thought I had discovered that some old stocks I had had acquired a fabulous value. She believed it, too, but because she thought I was now a rich man and she only a poor girl — a mere servant to her father's guests — she refused me. Refused me because she thought I might regret it in the future, because she would not have it said that she had taken advantage of my proposal only when I was rich enough to make it."

"Well?" said Mrs. Horncastle incredulously, gazing straight before her; "and then?"

"In about an hour I discovered my error, that my stocks were worthless, that I was still a poor man. I thought it only honest to return to her and tell her, even though I had no hope. And then she pitied me, and cried, and accepted me. I tell it to you as her friend." He drew a little nearer and quite fraternally laid his hand upon her own. "I know you won't betray me, though you may think it wrong for me to have told it; but I wanted you to know how good she was and true."

For a moment Mrs. Horncastle was amazed and discomfited, although she saw, with the inscrutable instinct of her sex, no inconsistency between the Kitty of those days and the Kitty now shamefully hiding from her husband in the

same hotel. No doubt Kitty had some good reason for her chivalrous act. But she could see the unmistakable effect of that act upon the more logically reasoning husband, and that it might lead him to be more merciful to the later wrong. And there was a keener irony that his first movement of unconscious kindliness towards her was the outcome of his affection for his undeserving wife.

"You said just now she was more practical than you," she said dryly. "Apart from this evidence of it, what other reasons have you for thinking so? Do you refer to her independence, or her dealings in the stock market?" she asked, with a laugh.

"No," said Barker seriously, "for I do not think her quite practical there; indeed, I'm afraid she is about as bad as I am. But I'm glad you have spoken, for I can now talk confidentially with you, and as you and she are both in the same ventures, perhaps she will feel less compunction in hearing from you — as your own opinion — what I have to tell you than if I spoke to her myself. I am afraid she trusts implicitly to Van Loo's judgment as her broker. I believe he is strictly honorable, but the general opinion of his business insight is not high. They — perhaps I ought to say *he* — have been at least so unlucky that they might have learned prudence. The loss of twenty thousand dollars in three months" —

"Twenty thousand!" echoed Mrs. Horncastle.

"Yes. Why, you knew that; it was in the mine you and she visited; or, perhaps," he added hastily, as he flushed at his indiscretion, "she did n't tell you that."

But Mrs. Horncastle as hastily said, "Yes — yes — of course, only I had forgotten the amount;" and he continued: —

"That loss would have frightened any man; but you women are more daring. Only Van Loo ought to have withdrawn. Don't you think so? Of course I could n't say

anything to him without seeming to condemn my own wife; I could n't say anything to *her* because it 's her own money."

"I did n't know that Mrs. Barker had any money of her own," said Mrs. Horncastle.

"Well, I gave it to her," said Barker, with sublime simplicity, "and that would make it all the worse for me to speak about it."

Mrs. Horncastle was silent. A new theory flashed upon her which seemed to reconcile all the previous inconsistencies of the situation. Van Loo, under the guise of a lover, was really possessing himself of Mrs. Barker's money. This accounted for the risks he was running in this escapade, which were so incongruous to the rascal's nature. He was calculating that the scandal of an intrigue would relieve him of the perils of criminal defalcation. It was compatible with Kitty's innocence, though it did not relieve her vanity of the part it played in this despicable comedy of passion. All that Mrs. Horncastle thought of now was the effect of its eventful revelation upon the man before her. Of course, he would overlook his wife's trustfulness and business ignorance — it would seem so like his own unselfish faith! That was the fault of all unselfish goodness; it even took the color of adjacent evil, without altering the nature of either. Mrs. Horncastle set her teeth tightly together, but her beautiful mouth smiled upon Barker, though her eyes were bent upon the tablecloth before her.

"I shall do all I can to impress your views upon her," she said at last, "though I fear they will have little weight if given as my own. And you overrate my general influence with her."

Her handsome head drooped in such a thoughtful humility that Barker instinctively drew nearer to her. Besides, she had not lifted her dark lashes for some moments, and he had the still youthful habit of looking frankly into the eyes of those he addressed.

"No," he said eagerly; "how could I? She could not help but love you and do as you would wish. I can't tell you how glad and relieved I am to find that you and she have become such friends. You know I always thought you beautiful, I always thought you so clever — I was even a little frightened of you; but I never until now knew you were so *good.* No, stop! Yes, I *did* know it. Do you remember once in San Francisco, when I found you with Sta in your lap in the drawing-room? I knew it then. You tried to make me think it was a whim — the fancy of a bored and worried woman. But I knew better. And I knew what you were thinking then. Shall I tell you?"

As her eyes were still cast down, although her mouth was still smiling, in his endeavors to look into them his face was quite near hers. He fancied that it bore the look she had worn once before.

"You were thinking," he said, in a voice which had grown suddenly quite hesitating and tremulous,— he did not know why, — "that the poor little baby was quite friendless and alone. You were pitying it — you know you were — because there was no one to give it the loving care that was its due, and because it was intrusted to that hired nurse in that great hotel. You were thinking how you would love it if it were yours, and how cruel it was that Love was sent without an object to waste itself upon. You were: I saw it in your face."

She suddenly lifted her eyes and looked full into his with a look that held and possessed him. For a moment his whole soul seemed to tremble on the verge of their lustrous depths, and he drew back dizzy and frightened. What he saw there he never clearly knew; but, whatever it was, it seemed to suddenly change his relations to her, to the room, to his wife, to the world without. It was a glimpse of a world of which he knew nothing. He had looked frankly and admiringly into the eyes of other pretty women; he

had even gazed into her own before, but never with this feeling. A sudden sense that what he had seen there he had himself evoked, that it was an answer to some question he had scarcely yet formulated, and that they were both now linked by an understanding and consciousness that was irretrievable, came over him. He rose awkwardly and went to the window. She rose also, but more leisurely and easily, moved one of the books on the table, smoothed out her skirts, and changed her seat to a little sofa. It is the woman who always comes out of these crucial moments unruffled.

"I suppose you will be glad to see your friend Mr. Demorest when you go back," she said pleasantly; "for of course he will be at Hymettus awaiting you."

He turned eagerly, as he always did at the name. But even then he felt that Demorest was no longer of such importance to him. He felt, too, that he was not yet quite sure of his voice, or even what to say. As he hesitated she went on half playfully: "It seems hard that you had to come all the way here on such a bootless errand. You have n't even seen your wife yet."

The mention of his wife recalled him to himself, oddly enough, when Demorest's name had failed. But very differently. Out of his whirling consciousness came the instinctive feeling that he could not see her now. He turned, crossed the room, sat down on the sofa beside Mrs. Horncastle, and without, however, looking at her, said, with his eyes on the floor, "No; and I 've been thinking that it 's hardly worth while to disturb her so early to-morrow as I should have to go. So I think it 's a good deal better to let her have a good night's rest, remain here quietly with you to-morrow until the stage leaves, and that both of you come over together. My horse is still saddled, and I will be back at Hymettus before Demorest has gone to bed."

He was obliged to look up at her as he rose. Mrs. Horncastle was sitting erect, beautiful, and dazzling as even

he had never seen her before. For his resolution had suddenly lifted a great weight from her shoulders, — the dangerous meeting of husband and wife the next morning, and its results, whatever they might be, had been quietly averted. She felt, too, a half-frightened joy even in the constrained manner in which he had imparted his determination. That frankness which even she had sometimes found so crushing was gone.

"I really think you are quite right," she said, rising also, "and, besides, you see, it will give me a chance to talk to her as you wished."

"To talk to her as I wished?" echoed Barker abstractedly.

"Yes, about Van Loo, you know," said Mrs. Horncastle, smiling.

"Oh, certainly — about Van Loo, of course," he returned hurriedly.

"And then," said Mrs. Horncastle brightening, "I'll tell her. Stay!" she interrupted herself hurriedly. "Why need I say anything about your having been here *at all?* It might only annoy her, as you yourself suggest." She stopped breathlessly with parted lips.

"Why, indeed?" said Barker vaguely. Yet all this was so unlike his usual truthfulness that he slightly hesitated.

"Besides," continued Mrs. Horncastle, noticing it, "you know you can always tell her later, if necessary." And she added with a charming mischievousness, "As she did n't tell you she was coming, I really don't see why you are bound to tell her that you were here."

The sophistry pleased Barker, even though it put him into a certain retaliating attitude towards his wife which he was not aware of feeling. But, as Mrs. Horncastle put it, it was only a playful attitude.

"Certainly," he said. "Don't say anything about it."

He moved to the door with his soft, broad-brimmed hat swinging between his fingers. She noticed for the first time that he looked taller in his long black serape and riding-boots, and, oddly enough, much more like the hero of an amorous tryst than Van Loo. "I know," she said brightly, "you are eager to get back to your old friend, and it would be selfish for me to try to keep you longer. You have had a stupid evening, but you have made it pleasant to me by telling me what you thought of me. And before you go I want you to believe that I shall try to keep that good opinion." She spoke frankly in contrast to the slight worldly constraint of Barker's manner; it seemed as if they had changed characters. And then she extended her hand.

With a low bow, and without looking up, he took it. Again their pulses seemed to leap together with one accord and the same mysterious understanding. He could not tell if he had unconsciously pressed her hand, or if she had returned the pressure. But when their hands unclasped it seemed as if it were the division of one flesh and spirit.

She remained standing by the open door until his footsteps passed down the staircase. Then she suddenly closed and locked the door with an instinct that Mrs. Barker might at once return now that he was gone, and she wished to be a moment alone to recover herself. But she presently opened it again and listened. There was a noise in the courtyard, but it sounded like the rattle of wheels more than the clatter of a horseman. Then she was overcome — a sudden sense of pity for the unfortunate woman still hiding from her husband — and felt a momentary chivalrous exaltation of spirit. Certainly she had done "good" to that wretched "Kitty;" perhaps she had earned the epithet that Barker had applied to her. Perhaps that was the meaning of all this happiness to her, and the result was to be only the happiness and reconciliation of the wife and husband. This

was to be her reward. I grieve to say that the tears had come into her beautiful eyes at this satisfactory conclusion, but she dashed them away and ran out into the hall. It was quite dark, but there was a faint glimmer on the opposite wall as if the door of Mrs. Barker's bedroom were ajar to an eager listener. She flew towards the glimmer, and pushed the door open: the room was empty. Empty of Mrs. Barker, empty of her dressing-box, her reticule and shawl. She was gone.

Still, Mrs. Horncastle lingered; the woman might have got frightened and retreated to some further room at the opening of the door and the coming out of her husband. She walked along the passage, calling her name softly. She even penetrated the dreary, half-lit public parlor, expecting to find her crouching there. Then a sudden wild idea took possession of her; the miserable wife had repented of her act and of her concealment, and had crept downstairs to await her husband in the office. She had told him some new lie, had begged him to take her with him, and Barker, of course, had assented. Yes, she now knew why she had heard the rattling wheels instead of the clattering hoofs she had listened for. They had gone together, as he first proposed, in the buggy.

She ran swiftly down the stairs and entered the office. The overworked clerk was busy and querulously curt. These women were always asking such idiotic questions. Yes, Mr. Barker had just gone.

"With Mrs. Barker in the buggy?" asked Mrs. Horncastle.

"No, as he came — on horseback. Mrs. Barker left *half an hour ago.*"

"Alone?"

This was apparently too much for the long-suffering clerk. He lifted his eyes to the ceiling, and then, with painful precision, and accenting every word with his pencil on the desk

before him, said deliberately, "Mrs. George Barker — left — here — with her — escort — the — man she — was — always — asking — for — in — the — buggy — at exactly — 9.35." And he plunged into his work again.

Mrs. Horncastle turned, ran up the staircase, reëntered the sitting-room, and slamming the door behind her, halted in the centre of the room, panting, erect, beautiful, and menacing. And she was alone in this empty room — this deserted hotel. From this very room her husband had left her with a brutality on his lips. From this room the fool and liar she had tried to warn had gone to her ruin with a swindling hypocrite. And from this room the only man in the world she ever cared for had gone forth bewildered, wronged, and abused, and she knew now she could have kept and comforted him.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Philip Demorest left the stagecoach at the cross-roads he turned into the only wayside house, the blacksmith's shop, and, declaring his intention of walking over to Hymettus, asked permission to leave his hand-bag and wraps until they could be sent after him. The blacksmith was surprised that this "likely mannered," distinguished-looking "city man" should *walk* eight miles when he could ride, and tried to dissuade him, offering his own buggy. But he was still more surprised when Demorest, laying aside his duster, took off his coat, and, slinging it on his arm, prepared to set forth with the good-humored assurance that he would do the distance in a couple of hours and get in in time for supper. "I would n't be too sure of that," said the blacksmith grimly, "or even of getting a room. They 're a stuck-up lot over there, and they ain't goin' to hump themselves over a chap who comes traipsin' along the road like any tramp, with nary baggage." But Demorest laughingly accepted the risk, and taking his stout stick in one hand, pressed a gold coin into the blacksmith's palm, which was, however, declined with such reddening promptness that Demorest as promptly reddened and apologized. The habits of European travel had been still strong on him, and he felt a slight patriotic thrill as he said, with a grave smile, "Thank you, then; and thank you still more for reminding me that I am among my own 'people,'" and stepped lightly out into the road.

The air was still deliciously cool, but warmer currents from the heated pines began to alternate with the wind from the summit. He found himself sometimes walking

through a stratum of hot air which seemed to exhale from the wood itself, while his head and breast were swept by the mountain breeze. He felt the old intoxication of the balmy-scented air again, and the five years of care and hopelessness laid upon his shoulders since he had last breathed its fragrance slipped from them like a burden. There had been but little change here: perhaps the road was wider and the dust lay thicker, but the great pines still mounted in serried ranks on the slopes as before, with no gaps in their unending files. Here was the spot where the stagecoach had passed them that eventful morning when they were coming out of their camp life into the world of civilization; a little further back, the spot where Jack Hamlin had forced upon him that grim memento of the attempted robbery of their cabin, which he had kept ever since. He half smiled again at the superstitious interest that had made him keep it, with the intention of some day returning to bury it, with all recollections of the deed, under the site of the old cabin. As he went on in the vivifying influence of the air and scene, new life seemed to course through his veins; his step seemed to grow as elastic as in the old days of their bitter but hopeful struggle for fortune, when he had gayly returned from his weekly tramp to Boomville laden with the scant provision procured by their scant earnings and dying credit. Those were the days when *her* living image still inspired his heart with faith and hope; when everything was yet possible to youth and love, and before the irony of fate had given him fortune with one hand only to withdraw *her* with the other. It was strange and cruel that coming back from his quest of rest and forgetfulness he should find only these youthful and sanguine dreams revive with his reviving vigor. He walked on more hurriedly as if to escape them, and was glad to be diverted by one or two carryalls and char-a-bancs filled with gayly dressed pleasure parties — evidently

visitors to Hymettus — which passed him on the road. Here were the first signs of change. He recalled the train of pack-mules of the old days, the file of pole-and-basket carrying Chinese, the squaw with the papoose strapped to her shoulder, or the wandering and footsore prospector, who were the only wayfarers he used to meet. He contrasted their halts and friendly greetings with the insolent curiosity or undisguised contempt of the carriage folk, and smiled as he thought of the warning of the blacksmith. But this did not long divert him; he found himself again returning to his previous thought. Indeed, the face of a young girl in one of the carriages had quite startled him with its resemblance to an old memory of his lost love as he saw her, — her frail, pale elegance encompassed in laces as she leaned back in her drive through Fifth Avenue, with eyes that lit up and became transfigured only as he passed. He tried to think of his useless quest in search of her last resting-place abroad; how he had been baffled by the opposition of her surviving relations, already incensed by the thought that her decline had been the effect of her hopeless passion. He tried to recall the few frigid lines that reconveyed to him the last letter he had sent her, with the announcement of her death and the hope that "his persecutions" would now cease. A wild idea had sometimes come to him out of the very insufficiency of his knowledge of this climax, but he had always put it aside as a precursor of that madness which might end his ceaseless thought. And now it was returning to him, here, thousands of miles away from where she was peacefully sleeping, and even filling him with the vigor of youthful hope.

The brief mountain twilight was giving way now to the radiance of the rising moon. He endeavored to fix his thoughts upon his partners, who were to meet him at Hymettus after these long years of separation.

Hymettus! He recalled now the odd coincidence that

he had mischievously used as a gag to his questioning fellow traveler; but now he had really come from a villa near Athens to find his old house thus classically rechristened after it, and thought of it with a gravity he had not felt before. He wondered who had named it. There was no suggestion of the soft, sensuous elegance of the land he had left in those great heroics of nature before him. Those enormous trees were no woods for fauns or dryads; they had their own godlike majesty of bulk and height, and as he at last climbed the summit and saw the dark-helmeted head of Black Spur before him, and beyond it the pallid, spiritual cloud of the Sierras, he did not think of Olympus. Yet for a moment he was startled, as he turned to the right, by the Doric-columned façade of a temple painted by the moonbeams and framed in an opening of the dark woods before him. It was not until he had reached it that he saw that it was the new wooden post-office of Heavy Tree Hill.

And now the buildings of the new settlement began to faintly appear. But the obscurity of the shadow and the equally disturbing unreality of the moonlight confused him in his attempts to recognize the old landmarks. A broad and well-kept winding road had taken the place of the old steep, but direct trail to his cabin. He had walked for some moments in uncertainty, when a sudden sweep of the road brought the full crest of the hill above and before him, crowned with a tiara of lights, overtopping a long base of flashing windows. That was all that was left of Heavy Tree Hill. The old foreground of buckeye and odorous ceanothus was gone. Even the great grove of pines behind it had vanished.

There was already a stir of life in the road, and he could see figures moving slowly along a kind of sterile, formal terrace spread with a few dreary marble vases and plaster statues, which had replaced the natural slope and the great

quartz buttresses of outcrop that supported it. Presently he entered a gate, and soon found himself in the carriage drive leading to the hotel veranda. A number of fair promenaders were facing the keen mountain night wind in wraps and furs. Demorest had replaced his coat, but his boots were red with dust, and as he ascended the steps he could see that he was eyed with some superciliousness by the guests and with considerable suspicion by the servants. One of the latter was approaching him with an insolent smile when a figure darted from the vestibule, and, brushing the waiter aside, seized Demorest's two hands in his and held him at arm's length.

"Demorest, old man!"

"Stacy, old chap!"

"But where's your team? I've had all the spare hostlers and hall-boys listening for you at the gate. And where's Barker? When he found you'd given the deadcut to the railroad — *his* railroad, you know — he loped over to Boomville after you."

Demorest briefly explained that he had walked by the old road and probably missed him. But by this time the waiters, crushed by the spectacle of this travel-worn stranger's affectionate reception by the great financial magnate, were wildly applying their brushes and handkerchiefs to his trousers and boots until Stacy again swept them away.

"Get off, all of you! Now, Phil, you come with me. The house is full, but I've made the manager give you a lady's drawing-room suite. When you telegraphed you'd meet us *here* there was no chance to get anything else. It's really Mrs. Van Loo's family suite; but they were sent for to go to Marysville yesterday, and so we'll run you in for the night."

"But" — protested Demorest.

"Nonsense!" said Stacy, dragging him away. "We'll pay for it; and I reckon the old lady won't object to taking

her share of the damage either, or she isn't Van Loo's mother. Come."

Demorest felt himself hurried forward by the energetic Stacy, preceded by the obsequious manager, through a corridor to a handsomely furnished suite, into whose bathroom Stacy incontinently thrust him.

"There! Wash up; and by the time you're ready Barker ought to be back, and we'll have supper. It's waiting for us in the other room."

"But how about Barker, the dear boy?" persisted Demorest, holding open the door. "Tell me, is he well and happy?"

"About as well as we all are," said Stacy quickly, yet with a certain dry significance. "Never mind now; wait until you see him."

The door closed. When Demorest had finished washing, and wiped away the last red stain of the mountain road, he found Stacy seated by the window of the larger sitting-room. In the centre a table was spread for supper. A bright fire of hickory logs burnt on a marble hearth between two large windows that gave upon the distant outline of Black Spur. As Stacy turned towards him, by the light of the shaded lamp and flickering fire, Demorest had a good look at the face of his old friend and partner. It was as keen and energetic as ever, with perhaps an even more hawk-like activity visible in the eye and nostril; but it was more thoughtful and reticent in the lines of the mouth under the closely clipped beard and mustache, and when he looked up, at first there were two deep lines or furrows across his low, broad forehead. Demorest fancied, too, that there was a little of the old fighting look in his eye, but it softened quickly as his friend approached, and he burst out with his curt but honest single-syllabled laugh. "Ha! You look a little less like a roving Apache than you did when you came. I really thought the waiters were going to chuck

you. And you *are* tanned! Darned if you don't look like the profile stamped on a Continental penny! But here 's luck and a welcome back, old man!"

Demorest passed his arm around the neck of his seated partner, and grasping his upraised hand said, looking down with a smile, "And now about Barker."

"Oh, Barker, d—n him! He 's the same unshakable, unchangeable, ungrow-up-able Barker! With the devil's own luck, too! Waltzing into risks and waltzing out of 'em. With fads enough to put him in the insane asylum, if people did not prefer to keep him out of it to help 'em. Always believing in everybody, until they actually believe in themselves, and — shake him! And he 's got a wife that 's making a fool of herself, and I should n't wonder in time — of him!"

Demorest pressed his hand over his partner's mouth. "Come, Jim! You know you never really liked that marriage, simply because you thought that old man Carter made a good thing of it. And you never seem to have taken into consideration the happiness Barker got out of it. For he *did* love the girl. And he still is happy, is he not?" he added quickly, as Stacy uttered a grunt.

"As happy as a man can be who has his child here with a nurse while his wife is gallivanting in San Francisco, and throwing her money — and Lord knows what else — away at the bidding of a smooth-tongued, shady operator."

"Does *he* complain of it?" asked Demorest.

"Not he; the fool trusts her!" said Stacy curtly.

Demorest laughed. "That is happiness! Come, Jim! don't let us begrudge him that. But I 've heard that his affairs have again prospered."

"He built this railroad and this hotel. The bank owns both now. He did n't care to keep money in them after they were a success; said he was n't an engineer nor a hotel-keeper, and drew it out to find something new. But here

he comes," he added, as a horseman dashed into the drive before the hotel. "Question him yourself. You know you and he always get along best without me."

In another moment Barker had burst into the room, and in his first tempestuous greeting of Demorest the latter saw little change in his younger partner as he held him at arm's length to look at him. "Why, Barker boy, you have n't got a bit older since the day when — you remember — you went over to Boomville to cash your bonds, and then came back and burst upon us like this to tell us you were a beggar."

"Yes," laughed Barker, "and all the while you fellows were holding four aces up your sleeve in the shape of the big strike."

"And you, Georgy, old boy," returned Demorest, swinging Barker's two hands backwards and forwards, "were holding a royal flush up yours in the shape of your engagement to Kitty."

The fresh color died out of Barker's cheek even while the frank laugh was still on his mouth. He turned his face for a moment towards the window, and a swift and almost involuntary glance passed between the others. But he almost as quickly turned his glistening eyes back to Demorest again, and said eagerly, "Yes, dear Kitty! You shall see her and the baby to-morrow."

Then they fell upon the supper with the appetites of the Past, and for some moments they all talked eagerly and even noisily together, all at the same time, with even the spirits of the Past. They recalled every detail of their old life; eagerly and impetuously recounted the old struggles, hopes, and disappointments, gave the strange importance of schoolboys to unimportant events, and a mystic meaning to a shibboleth of their own; roared over old jokes with a delight they had never since given to new; reawakened idiotic nicknames and bywords with intense enjoyment;

grew grave, anxious, and agonized over forgotten names, trifling dates, useless distances, ineffective records, and feeble chronicles of their domestic economy. It was the thoughtful and melancholy Demorest who remembered the exact color and price paid for a certain shirt bought from a Greaser peddler amidst the envy of his companions; it was the financial magnate, Stacy, who could inform them what were the exact days they had saleratus bread and when flapjacks; it was the thoughtless and mercurial Barker who recalled with unheard-of accuracy, amidst the applause of the others, the full name of the Indian squaw who assisted at their washing. Even then they were almost feverishly loath to leave the subject, as if the Past, at least, was secure to them still, and they were even doubtful of their own free and full accord in the Present. Then they slipped rather reluctantly into their later experiences, but with scarcely the same freedom or spontaneity; and it was noticeable that these records were elicited from Barker by Stacy or from Stacy by Barker for the information of Demorest, often with chaffing and only under good-humored protest. "Tell Demorest how you broke the 'Copper Ring,'" from the admiring Barker, or, "Tell Demorest how your d—d foolishness in buying up the right and plant of the Ditch Company got you control of the railroad," from the mischievous Stacy, were challenges in point. Presently they left the table, and, to the astonishment of the waiters who removed the cloth, common brier-wood pipes, thoughtfully provided by Barker in commemoration of the Past, were lit, and they ranged themselves in armchairs before the fire quite unconsciously in their old attitudes. The two windows on either side of the hearth gave them the same view that the open door of the old cabin had made familiar to them, the league-long valley below the shadowy bulk of the Black Spur rising in the distance, and, still more remote, the pallid snow-line that soared even beyond its crest.

As in the old time, they were for many moments silent; and then, as in the old time, it was the irrepressible Barker who broke the silence. "But Stacy does not tell you anything about his friend, the beautiful Mrs. Horncastle. You know he 's the guardian of one of the finest women in California, — a woman as noble and generous as she is handsome. And think of it! He 's protecting her from her brute of a husband, and looking after her property. Is n't it good and chivalrous of him?"

The irrepressible laughter of the two men brought only wonder and reproachful indignation into the widely opened eyes of Barker. *He* was perfectly sincere. He had been thinking of Stacy's admiration for Mrs. Horncastle in his ride from Boomville, and, strange to say, yet characteristic of his nature, it was equally the natural outcome of his interview with her and the singular effect she had upon him. That he (Barker) thoroughly sympathized with her only convinced him that Stacy must feel the same for her, and that, no doubt, she must respond to him equally. And how noble it was in his old partner, with his advantages of position in the world and his protecting relations to her, not to avail himself of this influence upon her generous nature. If he himself — a married man and the husband of Kitty — was so conscious of her charm, how much greater it must be to the free and *inexperienced* Stacy.

The italics were in Barker's thought; for in those matters he felt that Stacy and even Demorest, occupied in other things, had not his knowledge. There was no idea or consciousness of heroically sacrificing himself or Mrs. Horncastle in this. I am afraid there was not even an idea of a superior morality in himself in giving up the possibility of loving her. Ever since Stacy had first seen her he had fancied that Stacy liked her, — indeed, Kitty fancied it, too, — and it seemed almost providential now that he should know how to assist his old partner to happiness. For it was incon-

ceivable that Stacy should not be able to rescue this woman from her shameful bonds, or that she should not consent to it through his (Barker's) arguments and entreaties. To a "champion of dames" this seemed only right and proper. In his unfailing optimism he translated Stacy's laugh as embarrassment and Demorest's as only ignorance of the real question. But Demorest had noticed, if he had not, that Stacy's laugh was a little nervously prolonged for a man of his temperament, and that he had cast a very keen glance at Barker. A messenger arriving with a telegram brought from Boomville called Stacy momentarily away, and Barker was not slow to take advantage of his absence.

"I wish, Phil," he said, hitching his chair closer to Demorest, "that you would think seriously of this matter, and try to persuade Stacy — who, I believe, is more interested in Mrs. Horncastle than he cares to show — to put a little of that determination in love that he has shown in business. She 's an awfully fine woman, and in every way suited to him, and he is letting an absurd sense of pride and honor keep him from influencing her to get rid of her impossible husband. There 's no reason," continued Barker in a burst of enthusiastic simplicity, "that *because* she has found some one she likes better, and who would treat her better, that she should continue to stick to that beast whom all California would gladly see her divorced from. I never could understand that kind of argument, could you?"

Demorest looked at his companion's glowing cheek and kindling eye with a smile. "A good deal depends upon the side from which you argue. But, frankly, Barker boy, though I think I know you in all your phases, I am not prepared yet to accept you as a match-maker! However, I 'll think it over, and find out something more of this from your goddess, who seems to have bewitched you both. But what does Mistress Kitty say to your admiration?"

Barker's face clouded, but instantly brightened. "Oh,

they 're the best of friends; they 're quite like us, you know, even to larks they have together." He stopped and colored at his slip. But Demorest, who had noticed his change of expression, was more concerned at the look of half incredulity and half suspicion with which Stacy, who had reëntered the room in time to hear Barker's speech, was regarding his unconscious younger partner.

"I did n't know that Mrs. Horncastle and Mrs. Barker were such friends," he said dryly, as he sat down again. But his face presently became so abstracted that Demorest said gayly: —

"Well, Jim, I 'm glad I 'm not a Napoleon of Finance! I could n't stand it to have my privacy or my relaxation broken in upon at any moment, as yours was just now. What confounded somersault in stocks has put that face on you?"

Stacy looked up quickly with his brief laugh. "I 'm afraid you 'd be none the wiser if I told you. That was a pony express messenger from New York. You remember how Barker, that night of the strike, when we were sitting together here, or very near here, proposed that we ought to have a password or a symbol to call us together in case of emergency, for each other's help? Well, let us say I have two partners, one in Europe and one in New York. That was my password."

"And, I hope, no more serious than ours," added Demorest.

Stacy laughed his short laugh. Nevertheless, the conversation dragged again. The feverish gayety of the early part of the evening was gone, and they seemed to be suffering from the reaction. They fell into their old attitudes, looking from the firelight to the distant bulk of Black Spur without a word. The occasional sound of the voices of promenaders on the veranda at last ceased; there was the noise of the shutting of heavy doors below, and Barker rose.

"You 'll excuse me, boys; but I must go and say good-night to little Sta, and see that he 's all right. I have n't seen him since I got back. But" — to Demorest — "you 'll see him to-morrow, when Kitty comes. It is as much as my life is worth to show him before she certifies him as being presentable." He paused, and then added: "Don't wait up, you fellows, for me; sometimes the little chap won't let me go. It 's as if he thought, now Kitty 's away, I was all he had. But I 'll be up early in the morning and see you. I dare say you and Stacy have a heap to say to each other on business, and you won't miss me. So I 'll say good-night." He laughed lightly, pressed the hands of his partners in his usual hearty fashion, and went out of the room, leaving the gloom a little deeper than before.

It was so unusual for Barker to be the first to leave anybody or anything in trouble that they both noticed it. "But for that," said Demorest, turning to Stacy as the door closed, "I should say the dear fellow was absolutely unchanged. But he seemed a little anxious to-night."

"I should n't wonder. He 's got two women on his mind, — as if one was not enough."

"I don't understand. You say his wife is foolish, and this other" —

"Never mind that now," interrupted Stacy, getting up and putting down his pipe. "Let 's talk a little business. That other stuff will keep."

"By all means," said Demorest, with a smile, settling down into his chair a little wearily, however. "I forgot business. And I forgot, my dear Jim, to congratulate you. I 've heard all about you, even in New York. You 're the man who, according to everybody, now holds the finances of the Pacific Slope in his hands. And," he added, leaning affectionately towards his old partner, "I don't know any one better equipped in honesty, straightforwardness, and courage for such a responsibility than you."

"I only wish," said Stacy, looking thoughtfully at Demorest, "that I did n't hold nearly a million of your money included in the finances of the Pacific Slope."

"Why," said the smiling Demorest, "as long as I am satisfied?"

"Because *I* am not. If you 're satisfied, I 'm a wretched idiot and not fit for my position. Now, look here, Phil. When you wrote me to sell out your shares in the Wheat Trust, I was a little staggered. I knew your gait, my boy, and I knew, too, that, while you did n't know enough to trust your own opinions or feeling, you knew too much to trust any one's opinion that was n't first-class. So I reckoned you had the straight tip; but *I* did n't see it. Now I ought not to have been staggered if I was fit for your confidence, or, if I was staggered, I ought to have had enough confidence in myself not to mind you. See?"

"I admit your logic, old man," said Demorest, with an amused face, "but I don't see your premises. *When* did I tell you to sell out?"

"Two days ago. You wrote just after you arrived."

"I have never written to you since I arrived. I only telegraphed to you to know where we should meet, and received your message to come here."

"You never wrote me from San Francisco?"

"Never."

Stacy looked concernedly at his friend. Was he in his right mind? He had heard of cases where melancholy brooding on a fixed idea had affected the memory. He took from his pocket a letter-case, and selecting a letter handed it to Demorest without speaking.

Demorest glanced at it, turned it over, read its contents, and in a grave voice said, "There is something wrong here. It is like my handwriting, but I never wrote the letter, nor has it been in my hand before."

Stacy sprang to his side. "Then it 's a forgery!"

"Wait a moment." Demorest, who, although very grave, was the more collected of the two, went to a writing-desk, selected a sheet of paper, and took up a pen. "Now," he said, "dictate that letter to me."

Stacy began, Demorest's pen rapidly following him: —

"DEAR JIM, — On receipt of this get rid of my Wheat Trust shares at whatever figure you can. From the way things pointed in New York" —

"Stop!" interrupted Demorest.

"Well?" said Stacy impatiently.

"Now, my dear Jim," said Demorest plaintively, "when did you ever know me to write such a sentence as 'the way things pointed'?"

"Let me finish reading," said Stacy. This literary sensitiveness at such a moment seemed little short of puerility to the man of business.

"From the way things pointed in New York," continued Stacy, "and from private advices received, this seems to be the only prudent course before the feathers begin to fly. Longing to see you again and the dear old stamping-ground at Heavy Tree. Love to Barker. Has the dear old boy been at any fresh crank lately?

"Yours, PHIL DEMOREST."

The dictation and copy finished together. Demorest laid the freshly written sheet beside the letter Stacy had produced. They were very much alike and yet quite distinct from each other. Only the signature seemed identical.

"That's the invariable mistake with the forger," said Demorest; "he always forgets that signatures ought to be identical with the text rather than with each other."

But Stacy did not seem to hear this or require further proof. His face was quite gray and his lips compressed until lost in his closely set beard, as he gazed fixedly out of the window. For the first time, really concerned and touched, Demorest laid his hand gently on his shoulder.

"Tell me, Jim, how much does this mean to you — apart from me? Don't think of me."

"I don't know yet," said Stacy slowly. "That 's the trouble. And I won't know until I know who 's at the bottom of it. Does anybody know of your affairs with me?"

"No one."

"No confidential friend, eh?"

"None."

"No one who has access to your secrets? No — no — woman? Excuse me, Phil," he said, as a peculiar look passed over Demorest's face, "but this is business."

"No," he returned, with that gentleness that used to frighten them in the old days, "it 's ignorance. You fellows always say 'Cherchez la femme' when you can't say anything else. Come, now," he went on more brightly, "look at the letter. Here 's a man, commercially educated, for he has used the usual business formulas, 'on receipt of this' and 'advices received,' which I won't merely say *I* don't use, but which few but commercial men use. Next, here 's a man who uses slang, not only ineptly, but artificially, to give the letter the easy, familiar turn it has n't from beginning to end. I need only say, my dear Stacy, that I don't write slang to you, but that nobody who understands slang ever writes it in that way. And then the knowledge of my opinion of Barker is such as might be gained from the reading of my letters by a person who could n't comprehend my feelings. No, let me play inquisitor for a few moments. Has anybody access to my letters to *you?*"

"No one. I keep them locked up in a cabinet. I only make memorandums of your instructions, which I give to my clerks, but never your letters."

"But your clerks sometimes see you make memorandums from them?"

"Yes, but none of them have the ability to do this sort of thing, nor the opportunity of profiting by it."

"Has any woman — now this is not retaliation, my dear Jim, for I fancy I detect a woman's cleverness and a woman's stupidity in this forgery — any access to your secrets or my letters? A woman's villainy is always effective for the moment, but always defective when probed."

The look of scorn which passed over Stacy's face was quite as distinct as Demorest's previous protest, as he said contemptuously, "I'm not such a fool as to mix up petticoats with my business, whatever I do."

"Well, one thing more. I have told you that in my opinion the forger has a commercial education or style, that he does n't know me nor Barker, and don't understand slang. Now, I have to add what must have occurred to you, Jim, that the forger is either a coward, or his object is not altogether mercenary: for the same ability displayed in this letter would on the signature alone — had it been on a check or draft — have drawn from your bank twenty times the amount concerned. Now, what is the actual loss by this forgery?"

"Very little; for you've got a good price for your stocks, considering the depreciation in realizing suddenly on so large an amount. I told my broker to sell slowly and in small quantities to avoid a panic. But the real loss is the control of the stock."

"But the amount I had was not enough to affect that," said Demorest.

"No, but I was carrying a large amount myself, and together we controlled the market, and now I have unloaded, too."

"You sold out! and with your doubts?" said Demorest.

"That's just it," said Stacy, looking steadily at his

companion's face, "because I *had* doubts, and it won't do for me to have them. I ought either to have disobeyed your letter and kept your stock and my own, or have done just what I did. I might have hedged on my own stock, but I don't believe in hedging. There is no middle course to a man in my business if he wants to keep at the top. No great success, no great power, was ever created by it."

Demorest smiled. "Yet you accept the alternative also, which is ruin?"

"Precisely," said Stacy. "When you returned the other day you were bound to find me what I was or a beggar. But nothing between. However," he added, "this has nothing to do with the forgery, or," he smiled grimly, "everything to do with it. Hush! Barker is coming."

There was a quick step along the corridor approaching the room. The next moment the door flew open to the bounding step and laughing face of Barker. Whatever of thoughtfulness or despondency he had carried from the room with him was completely gone. With his amazing buoyancy and power of reaction he was there again in his usual frank, cheerful simplicity.

"I thought I'd come in and say good-night," he began, with a laugh. "I got Sta asleep after some high jinks we had together, and then I reckoned it was n't the square thing to leave just you two together, the first night you came. And I remembered I had some business to talk over, too, so I thought I'd chip in again and take a hand. It's only the shank of the evening yet," he continued gayly, "and we ought to sit up at least long enough to see the old snow-line vanish, as we did in old times. But I say," he added suddenly, as he glanced from the one to the other, "you've been having it pretty strong already. Why, you both look as you did that night the back-water of the South Fork came into our cabin. What's up?"

"Nothing," said Demorest hastily, as he caught a glance of Stacy's impatient face. "Only all business is serious, Barker boy, though you don't seem to feel it so."

"I reckon you 're right there," said Barker, with a chuckle. "People always laugh, of course, when I talk business, so it might make it a little livelier for you and more of a change if I chipped in now. Only I don't know which you 'll do. Hand me a pipe. Well," he continued, filling the pipe Demorest shoved towards him, "you see, I was in Sacramento yesterday, and I went into Van Loo's branch office, as I heard he was there, and I wanted to find out something about Kitty's investments, which I don't think he 's managing exactly right. He was n't there, however, but as I was waiting I heard his clerks talk about a drop in the Wheat Trust, and that there was a lot of it put upon the market. They seemed to think that something had happened, and it was going down still further. Now I knew it was your pet scheme, and that Phil had a lot of shares in it, too, so I just slipped out and went to a broker's and told him to buy all he could of it. And, by Jove! I was a little taken aback when I found what I was in for, for everybody seemed to have unloaded, and I found I had n't money enough to pay margins, but I knew that Demorest was here, and I reckoned on his seeing me through." He stopped and colored, but added hopefully, "I reckon I 'm safe, anyway, for just as the thing was over those same clerks of Van Loo's came bounding into the office to buy up everything. And offered to take it off my hands and pay the margins."

"And you?" said both men eagerly, and in a breath.

Barker stared at them, and reddened and paled by turns. "I held on," he stammered. "You see, boys" —

Both men had caught him by the arms. "How much have you got?" they said, shaking him as if to precipitate the answer.

"It's a heap!" said Barker. "It's a ghastly lot now I think of it. I'm afraid I'm in for fifty thousand, if a cent."

To his infinite astonishment and delight he was alternately hugged and tossed backwards and forwards between the two men quite in the fashion of the old days. Breathless but laughing, he at length gasped out, "What does it all mean?"

"Tell him everything, Jim, — *everything*," said Demorest quickly.

Stacy briefly related the story of the forgery, and then laid the letter and its copy before him. But Barker only read the forgery.

"How could *you*, Stacy — one of the three partners of Heavy Tree — be deceived! Don't you see it's Phil's handwriting — but it is n't *Phil!*"

"But have you any idea *who* it is?" said Stacy.

"Not me," said Barker, with widely opened eyes. "You see it must be somebody whom we are familiar with. I can't imagine such a scoundrel."

"How did *you* know that Demorest had stock?" asked Stacy.

"He told me in one of his letters, and advised me to go into it. But just then Kitty wanted money, I think, and I did n't go in."

"I remember it," struck in Demorest. "But surely it was no secret. My name would be on the transfer books for any one to see."

"Not so," said Stacy quickly. "You were one of the original shareholders; there was no transfer, and the books as well as the shares of the company were in my hands."

"And your clerks?" added Demorest.

Stacy was silent. After a pause he asked, "Did anybody ever see that letter, Barker?"

"No one but myself and Kitty."

"And would she be likely to talk of it?" continued Stacy.

"Of course not. Why should she? Whom could she talk to?" Yet he stopped suddenly, and then with his characteristic reaction added, with a laugh, "Why no, certainly not."

"Of course, everybody knew that you had bought the shares at Sacramento?"

"Yes. Why, you know I told you the Van Loo clerks came to me and wanted to take it off my hands."

"Yes, I remember; the Van Loo clerks; they knew it, of course," said Stacy, with a grim smile. "Well, boys," he said, with sudden alacrity, "I 'm going to turn in, for by sun-up to-morrow I must be on my way to catch the first train at the Divide for 'Frisco. We 'll hunt this thing down together, for I reckon we 're all concerned in it," he added, looking at the others, "and once more we 're partners as in the old times. Let us even say that I 've given Barker's signal or password," he added, with a laugh, "and we 'll stick together. Barker boy," he went on, grasping his younger partner's hand, "your instinct has saved us this time; d—d if I don't sometimes think it better than any other man's sabe; only," he dropped his voice slightly, "I wish you had it in other things than *finance*. Phil, I 've a word to say to you alone before I go. I may want you to follow me."

"But what can I do?" said Barker eagerly. "You 're not going to leave me out."

"You 've done quite enough for us, old man," said Stacy, laying his hand on Barker's shoulder. "And it may be for *us* to do something for *you*. Trot off to bed now, like a good boy. I 'll keep you posted when the time comes."

Shoving the protesting and leave-taking Barker with paternal familiarity from the room, he closed the door and faced Demorest.

"He 's the best fellow in the world," said Stacy quietly, "and has saved the situation: but we must n't trust too much to him for the present — not even seem to."

"Nonsense, man!" said Demorest impatiently. "You 're letting your prejudices go too far. Do you mean to say that you suspect his wife?"

"D—n his wife!" said Stacy almost savagely. "Leave her out of this. It 's Van Loo that I suspect. It was Van Loo who I knew was behind it, who expected to profit by it, and now we have lost him."

"But how?" said Demorest, astonished.

"How?" repeated Stacy impatiently. "You know what Barker said? Van Loo, either through stupidity, fright, or the wish to get the lowest prices, was too late to buy up the market. If he had, we might have openly declared the forgery, and if it was known that he or his friends had profited by it, even if we could not have proven his actual complicity, we could at least have made it too hot for him in California. But," said Stacy, looking intently at his friend, "do you know how the case stands now?"

"Well," said Demorest, a little uneasily under his friend's keen eyes, "we 've lost that chance, but we 've kept control of the stock."

"You think so? Well, let me tell you how the case stands and the price we pay for it," said Stacy deliberately, as he folded his arms and gazed at Demorest. "You and I, well known as old friends and former partners, for no apparent reason — for we cannot prove the forgery now — have thrown upon the market all our stock, with the usual effect of depreciating it. Another old friend and former partner has bought it in and sent up the price. A common trick, a vulgar trick, but not a trick worthy of James Stacy or Stacy's Bank!"

"But why not simply declare the forgery without making any specific charge against Van Loo?"

"Do you imagine, Phil, that any man would believe it, and the story of a providentially appointed friend like Barker who saved us from loss? Why, all California, from Cape Mendocino to Los Angeles, would roar with laughter over it! No! We must swallow it and the reputation of 'jockeying' with the Wheat Trust, too. That Trust 's as good as done for, for the present! Now you know why I did n't want poor Barker to know it, nor have much to do with our search for the forger."

"It would break the dear fellow's heart if he knew it," said Demorest.

"Well, it 's to save him from having his heart broken further that I intend to find out this forger," said Stacy grimly. "Good-night, Phil! I 'll telegraph to you when I want you, and then *come!*"

With another grip of the hand he left Demorest to his thoughts. In the first excitement of meeting his old partners, and in the later discovery of the forgery, Demorest had been diverted from his old sorrow, and for the time had forgotten it in sympathetic interest with the present. But, to his horror, when alone again, he found that interest growing as remote and vapid as the stories they had laughed over at the table, and even the excitement of the forged letter and its consequences began to be as unreal, as impotent, as shadowy, as the memory of the attempted robbery in the old cabin on that very spot. He was ashamed of that selfishness which still made him cling to this past, so much his own that he knew it debarred him from the human sympathy of his comrades. And even Barker, in whose courtship and marriage he had tried to resuscitate his youthful emotions and condone his selfish errors — even the suggestion of his unhappiness only touched him vaguely. He would no longer be a slave to the Past, or the memory that had deluded him a few hours ago. He walked to the window; alas, there was the same prospect that had looked

upon his dreams, had lent itself to his old visions. There was the eternal outline of the hills; there rose the steadfast pines; there was no change in *them*. It was this surrounding constancy of nature that had affected him. He turned away and entered the bedroom. Here he suddenly remembered that the mother of this vague enemy, Van Loo, — for his feeling towards him was still vague, as few men really hate the personality they do not know, — had only momentarily vacated it, and to his distaste of his own intrusion was now added the profound irony of his sleeping in the bed but lately occupied by the mother of the man who was suspected of having forged his name. He smiled faintly and looked around the apartment. It was handsomely furnished, and although it still had much of the characterlessness of the hotel room, it was distinctly flavored by its last occupant, and still brightened by that mysterious instinct of the sex which is inevitable. Where a man would have simply left his forgotten slippers or collars there was a glass of still unfaded flowers; the cold marble top of the dressing-table was littered with a few linen and silk toilet covers; and on the mantel-shelf was a sheaf of photographs. He walked towards them mechanically, glanced at them abstractedly, and then stopped suddenly with a beating heart. Before him was the picture of his past, the photograph of the one woman who had filled his life!

He cast a hurried glance around the room as if he half expected to see the original start up before him, and then eagerly seized it and hurried with it to the light. Yes! yes! It was *she*, — she as she had lived in his actual memory; she as she had lived in his dream. He saw her sweet eyes, but the frightened, innocent trouble had passed from them; there was the sensitive elegance of her graceful figure in evening dress; but the figure was fuller and maturer. Could he be mistaken by some wonderful resemblance acting upon his too willing brain? He turned the

photograph over. No; there on the other side, written in her own childlike hand, endeared and familiar to his recollection, was her own name, and the date! It was surely she!

How did it come there? Did the Van Loos know her? It was taken in Venice; there was the address of the photographers. The Van Loos were foreigners, he remembered; they had traveled; perhaps had met her there in 1858: that was the date in her handwriting; that was the date on the photographer's address — 1858. Suddenly he laid the photograph down, took with trembling fingers a letter-case from his pocket, opened it, and laid his last letter to her, indorsed with the cruel announcement of her death, before him on the table. He passed his hand across his forehead and opened the letter. It was dated 1856! The photograph must have been taken two years *after* her alleged death!

He examined it again eagerly, fixedly, tremblingly. A wild impulse to summon Barker or Stacy on the spot was restrained with difficulty, and only when he remembered that they could not help him. Then he began to oscillate between a joy and a new fear, which now, for the first time, began to dawn upon him. If the news of her death had been a fiendish trick of her relations, why had *she* never sought him? It was not ill health, restraint, nor fear; there was nothing but happiness and the strength of youth and beauty in that face and figure. *He* had not disappeared from the world; he was known of men; more, his memorable good fortune must have reached her ears. Had he wasted all these miserable years to find himself abandoned, forgotten, perhaps even a dupe? For the first time the sting of jealousy entered his soul. Perhaps, unconsciously to himself, his strange and varying feelings that afternoon had been the gathering climax of his mental condition; at all events, in the sudden revulsion there was

a shaking off of his apathetic thought; there was activity, even if it was the activity of pain. Here was a mystery to be solved, a secret to be discovered, a past wrong to be exposed, an enemy or, perhaps, even a faithless love to be punished. Perhaps he had even saved his reason at the expense of his love. He quickly replaced the photograph on the mantel-shelf, returned the letter carefully to his pocket-book, — no longer a souvenir of the past, but a proof of treachery, — and began mechanically to undress himself. He was quite calm now, and went to bed with a strange sense of relief, and slept as he had not slept since he was a boy.

The whole hotel had sunk to rest by this time, and then began the usual slow, nightly invasion and investment of it by nature. For all its broad verandas and glaring terraces, its long ranges of windows and glittering crest of cupola and tower, it gradually succumbed to the more potent influences around it, and became their sport and playground. The mountain breezes from the distant summit swept down upon its flimsy structure, shook the great glass windows as with a strong hand, and sent the balm of bay and spruce through every chink and cranny. In the great hall and corridors the carpets billowed with the intruding blast along the floors; there was the murmur of the pines in the passages, and the damp odor of leaves in the dining-room. There was the cry of night birds in the creaking cupola, and the swift rush of dark wings past bedroom windows. Lissome shapes crept along the terraces between the stolid wooden statues, or, bolder, scampered the whole length of the great veranda. In the lulling of the wind the breath of the woods was everywhere; even the aroma of swelling sap — as if the ghastly stumps on the deforested slope behind the hotel were bleeding afresh in the dewless night — stung the eyes and nostrils of the sleepers.

It was, perhaps, from such cause as this that Barker was awakened suddenly by the voice of the boy from the crib beside him, crying, "Mamma! mamma!" Taking the child in his arms, he comforted him, saying she would come that morning, and showed him the faint dawn already veiling with color the ghostly pallor of the Sierras. As they looked at it a great star shot forth from his brethren and fell. It did not fall perpendicularly, but seemed for some seconds to slip along the slopes of Black Spur, gleaming through the trees like a chariot of fire. It pleased the child to say that it was the light of mamma's buggy that was fetching her home, and it pleased the father to encourage the boy's fancy. And talking thus in confidential whispers they fell asleep once more, the father — himself a child in so many things — holding the smaller and frailer hand in his.

They did not know that on the other side of the Divide the wife and mother, scared, doubting, and desperate, by the side of her scared, doubting, and desperate accomplice, was flying down the slope on her night-long road to ruin. Still less did they know that, with the early singing birds, a careless horseman, emerging from the trail as the dust-stained buggy dashed past him, glanced at it with a puzzled air, uttered a quiet whistle of surprise, and then, wheeling his horse, gayly cantered after it.

CHAPTER V

In the exercise of his arduous profession, Jack Hamlin had sat up all night in the magnolia saloon of the Divide, and as it was rather early to go to bed, he had, after his usual habit, shaken off the sedentary attitude and prepared himself for sleep by a fierce preliminary gallop in the woods. Besides, he had been a large winner, and on those occasions he generally isolated himself from his companions to avoid foolish altercations with inexperienced players. Even in fighting Jack was fastidious, and did not like to have his stomach for a real difficulty distended and vitiated by small preliminary indulgences.

He was just emerging from the wood into the highroad when a buggy dashed past him, containing a man and a woman. The woman wore a thick veil; the man was almost undistinguishable from dust. The glimpse was momentary, but dislike has a keen eye, and in that glimpse Mr. Hamlin recognized Van Loo. The situation was equally clear. The bent heads and averted faces, the dust collected in the heedlessness of haste, the early hour, — indicating a night-long flight, — all made it plain to him that Van Loo was running away with some woman. Mr. Hamlin had no moral scruples, but he had the ethics of a sportsman, which he knew Van Loo was not. Whether the woman was an innocent schoolgirl or an actress, he was satisfied that Van Loo was doing a mean thing meanly. Mr. Hamlin also had a taste for mischief, and whether the woman was or was not fair game, he knew that for *his* purposes Van Loo was. With the greatest cheerfulness in the world he wheeled his horse and cantered after them.

They were evidently making for the Divide and a fresh horse, or to take the coach due an hour later. It was Mr. Hamlin's present object to circumvent this, and, therefore, it was quite in his way to return. Incidentally, however, the superior speed of his horse gave him the opportunity of frequently lunging towards them at a furious pace, which had the effect of frantically increasing their own speed, when he would pull up with a silent laugh before he was fairly discovered, and allow the sound of his rapid horse's hoofs to die out. In this way he amused himself until the straggling town of the Divide came in sight, when, putting his spurs to his horse again, he managed, under pretense of the animal becoming ungovernable, to twice "cross the bows" of the fugitives, compelling them to slacken speed. At the second of these passages Van Loo apparently lost prudence, and slashing out with his whip, the lash caught slightly on the counter of Hamlin's horse. Mr. Hamlin instantly acknowledged it by lifting his hat gravely, and speeded on to the hotel, arriving at the steps and throwing himself from the saddle exactly as the buggy drove up. With characteristic audacity, he actually assisted the frightened and eager woman to alight and run into the hotel. But in this action her veil was accidentally lifted. Mr. Hamlin instantly recognized the pretty woman who had been pointed out to him in San Francisco as Mrs. Barker, the wife of one of the partners whose fortunes had interested him five years ago. It struck him that this was an additional reason for his interference on Barker's account, although personally he could not conceive why a man should ever try to prevent a woman from running away from him. But then Mr. Hamlin's personal experiences had been quite the other way.

It was enough, however, to cause him to lay his hand lightly on Van Loo's arm as the latter, leaping down, was about to follow Mrs. Barker into the hotel. "You'll have time enough now," said Hamlin.

"Time for what?" said Van Loo savagely.

"Time to apologize for having cut my horse with your whip," said Jack sweetly. "We don't want to quarrel before a woman."

"I 've no time for fooling!" said Van Loo, endeavoring to pass.

But Jack's hand had slipped to Van Loo's wrist, although he still smiled cheerfully. "Ah! Then you *did* mean it, and you propose to give me satisfaction?"

Van Loo paled slightly; he knew Jack's reputation as a duelist. But he was desperate. "You see my position," he said hurriedly. "I 'm in a hurry; I have a lady with me. No man of honor" —

"You do me wrong," interrupted Jack, with a pained expression, — "you do, indeed. You are in a hurry — well, I have plenty of time. If you cannot attend to me now, why I will be glad to accompany you and the lady to the next station. Of course," he added, with a smile, "at a proper distance, and without interfering with the lady, whom I am pleased to recognize as the wife of an old friend. It would be more sociable, perhaps, if we had some general conversation on the road; it would prevent her being alarmed. I might even be of some use to *you*. If we are overtaken by her husband on the road, for instance, I should certainly claim the right to have the first shot at you. Boy!" he called to the hostler, "just sponge out Pancho's mouth, will you, to be ready when the buggy goes?" And, loosening his grip of Van Loo's wrist, he turned away as the other quickly entered the hotel.

But Mr. Van Loo did not immediately seek Mrs. Barker. He had already some experience of that lady's nerves and irascibility on the drive, and had begun to see his error in taking so dangerous an impediment to his flight from the country. And another idea had come to him. He had already effected his purpose of compromising her with him

in that flight, but it was still known only to few. If he left her behind for the foolish, doting husband, would not that devoted man take her back to avoid a scandal, and even forbear to pursue *him* for his financial irregularities? What were twenty thousand dollars of Mrs. Barker's money to the scandal of Mrs. Barker's elopement? Again, the failure to realize the forgery had left him safe, and Barker was sufficiently potent with the bank and Demorest to hush up that also. Hamlin was now the only obstacle to his flight; but even he would scarcely pursue *him* if Mrs. Barker were left behind. And it would be easier to elude him if he did.

In his preoccupation Van Loo did not see that he had entered the bar-room, but, finding himself there, he moved towards the bar; a glass of spirits would revive him. As he drank it he saw that the room was full of rough men, apparently miners or packers — some of them Mexican, with here and there a Kanaka or Australian. Two men more ostentatiously clad, though apparently on equal terms with the others, were standing in the corner with their backs towards him. From the general silence as he entered he imagined that he had been the subject of conversation, and that his altercation with Hamlin had been overheard. Suddenly one of the two men turned and approached him. To his consternation he recognized Steptoe, — Steptoe, whom he had not seen for five years until last night, when he had avoided him in the courtyard of the Boomville Hotel. His first instinct was to retreat, but it was too late. And the spirits had warmed him into temporary recklessness.

"You ain't goin' to be backed down by a short-card gambler, are yer?" said Steptoe, with coarse familiarity.

"I have a lady with me, and am pressed for time," said Van Loo quickly. "He knows it, otherwise he would not have dared" —

"Well, look here," said Steptoe roughly. "I ain't particularly sweet on you, as you know; but I and these

gentlemen," he added, dancing around the room, "ain't particularly sweet on Mr. Jack Hamlin neither, and we calculate to stand by you, if you say so. Now, I reckon you want to get away with the woman, and the quicker the better, as you're afraid there'll be somebody after you afore long. That's the way it pans out, isn't it? Well, when you're ready to go, and you just nip us the wink, we'll get in a circle round Jack and cover him, and if he starts after you we'll send him on a little longer journey!—eh, boys?"

The men muttered their approval, and one or two drew their revolvers from their belts. Van Loo's heart, which had leaped at first at this proposal of help, sank at this failure of his little plan of abandoning Mrs. Barker. He hesitated, and then stammered, "Thank you! Haste is everything with us now; but I should n't mind leaving the lady among *chivalrous gentlemen* like yourselves for a few hours only, until I could communicate with my friends and return to properly chastise this scoundrel."

Steptoe drew in his breath with a slight whistle, and gazed at Van Loo. He instantly understood him. But the plea did not suit Steptoe, who, for purposes of his own, wished to put Mrs. Barker beyond her husband's possible reach. He smiled grimly. "I think you 'd better take the woman with you," he said. "I don't think," he added in a lower voice, "that the boys would like your leaving *her*. They 're very high-toned, they are!" he concluded ironically.

"Then," said Van Loo, with another desperate idea, "*could you* not let us have saddle-horses instead of the buggy? We could travel faster, and in the event of pursuit and anything happening to *me*," he added loftily, "*she* at least could escape her pursuer's vengeance."

This suited Steptoe equally well, as long as the guilty couple fled *together*, and in the presence of witnesses. But he was not deceived by Van Loo's heroic suggestion of self-

sacrifice. "Quite right," he said sarcastically, "it shall be done, and I've no doubt *one* of you will escape. I'll send the horses round to the back door and keep the buggy in front. That will keep Jack there, *too*, — with the boys handy."

But Mr. Hamlin had quite as accurate an idea of Mr. Van Loo's methods and of his *own* standing with Steptoe's gang of roughs as Mr. Steptoe himself. More than that, he also had a hold on a smaller but more devoted and loyal following than Steptoe's. The employees and hostlers of the hotel worshiped him. A single word of inquiry revealed to him the fact that the buggy was *not* going on, but that Mr. Van Loo and Mrs. Barker *were* — on two horses, a temporary side-saddle having been constructed out of a mule's pack-tree. At which Mr. Hamlin, with his usual audacity, walked into the bar-room, and going to the bar leaned carelessly against it. Then turning to the lowering faces around him, he said, with a flash of his white teeth, "Well, boys, I'm calculating to leave the Divide in a few minutes to follow some friends in the buggy, and it seems to me only the square thing to stand the liquor for the crowd, without prejudice to any feeling or roughness there may be against me. Everybody who knows me knows that I'm generally there when the band plays, and I'm pretty sure to turn up for *that* sort of thing. So you'll just consider that I've had a good game on the Divide, and I'm reckoning it's only fair to leave a little of it behind me here, to 'sweeten the pot' until I call again. I only ask you, gentlemen, to drink success to my friends in the buggy as early and as often as you can." He flung two gold pieces on the counter and paused, smiling.

He was right in his conjecture. Even the men who would have willingly "held him up" a moment after, at the bidding of Steptoe, saw no reason for declining a free drink "without prejudice." And it was a part of the irony

of the situation that Steptoe and Van Loo were also obliged to participate, to keep in with their partisans. It was, however, an opportune diversion to Van Loo, who managed to get nearer the door leading to the back entrance of the hotel, and to Mr. Jack Hamlin, who was watching him, as the men closed up to the bar.

The toast was drunk with acclamation, followed by another and yet another. Steptoe and Van Loo, who had kept their heads cool, were both wondering if Hamlin's intention were to intoxicate and incapacitate the crowd at the crucial moment, and Steptoe smiled grimly over his superior knowledge of their alcoholic capacity. But suddenly there was the greater diversion of a shout from the road, the on-coming of a cloud of red dust, and the halt of another vehicle before the door. This time it was no jaded single horse and dust-stained buggy, but a double team of four spirited trotters, whose coats were scarcely turned with foam, before a light station wagon containing a single man. But that man was instantly recognized by every one of the outside loungers and stable-boys as well as the staring crowd within the saloon. It was James Stacy, the millionaire and banker. No one but himself knew that he had covered half the distance of a night-long ride from Boomville in two hours. But before they could voice their astonishment Stacy had thrown a letter to the obsequious landlord, and then gathering up the reins had sped away to the railroad station half a mile distant.

"Looks as if the Boss of Creation was in a hurry," said one of the eager gazers in the doorway. "Somebody goin' to get smashed, sure."

"More like as if he was just humpin' himself to keep from getting smashed," said Steptoe. "The bank has n't got over the effect of their smart deal in the Wheat Trust. Everything they had in their hands tumbled yesterday in Sacramento. Men like me and you ain't goin' to trust

their money to be 'jockeyed' with in that style. Nobody but a man with a swelled head like Stacy would have even dared to try it on. And now, by G—d! he 's got to pay for it."

The harsh, exultant tone of the speaker showed that he had quite forgotten Van Loo and Hamlin in his superior hatred of the millionaire, and both men noticed it. Van Loo edged still nearer to the door, as Steptoe continued, "Ever since he made that big strike on Heavy Tree five years ago, the country has n't been big enough to hold him. But mark my words, gentlemen, the time ain't far off when he 'll find a two-foot ditch again and a pick and grub wages room enough and to spare for him and his kind of cattle."

"You 're not drinking," said Jack Hamlin cheerfully.

Steptoe turned towards the bar, and then started. "Where 's Van Loo?" he demanded of Jack sharply.

Jack jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Gone to hurry up his girl, I reckon. I calculate he ain't got much time to fool away here."

Steptoe glanced suspiciously at Jack. But at the same moment they were all startled — even Jack himself — at the apparition of Mrs. Barker passing hurriedly along the veranda before the windows in the direction of the still waiting buggy. "D—n it!" said Steptoe in a fierce whisper to the man next him. "Tell her not *there* — at the back door!" But before the messenger reached the door there was a sudden rattle of wheels, and with one accord all except Hamlin rushed to the veranda, only to see Mrs. Barker driving rapidly away alone. Steptoe turned back into the room, but Jack also had disappeared.

For in the confusion created at the sight of Mrs. Barker, he had slipped to the back door and found, as he suspected, only one horse, and that with a side-saddle on. His intuitions were right. Van Loo, when he disappeared from the saloon, had instantly fled, taking the other horse and aban-

doning the woman to her fate. Jack as instantly leaped upon the remaining saddle and dashed after him. Presently he caught a glimpse of the fugitive in the distance, heard the half-angry, half-ironical shouts of the crowd at the back door, and as he reached the hill-top saw, with a mingling of satisfaction and perplexity, Mrs. Barker on the other road, still driving frantically in the direction of the railroad station. At which Mr. Hamlin halted, threw away his encumbering saddle, and, good rider that he was, remounted the horse, barebacked but for his blanket-pad, and thrusting his knees in the loose girths, again dashed forward,— with such good results that, as Van Loo galloped up to the stagecoach office, at the next station, and was about to enter the waiting coach for Marysville, the soft hand of Mr. Hamlin was laid on his shoulder.

"I told you," said Jack blandly, "that I had plenty of time. I would have been here *before* and even overtaken you, only you had the better horse and the only saddle."

Van Loo recoiled. But he was now desperate and reckless. Beckoning Jack out of earshot of the other passengers, he said with tightened lips, "Why do you follow me? What is your purpose in coming here?"

"I thought," said Hamlin dryly, "that I was to have the pleasure of getting satisfaction from you for the insult you gave me."

"Well, and if I apologize for it, what then?" he said quickly.

Hamlin looked at him quietly. "Well, I think I also said something about the lady being the wife of a friend of mine."

"And I have left her *behind.* Her husband can take her back without disgrace, for no one knows of her flight but you and me. Do you think your shooting me will save her? It will spread the scandal far and wide. For I warn you, that as I have apologized for what you choose

to call my personal insult, unless you murder me in cold blood without witness, I shall let them know the *reason* of your quarrel. And I can tell you more: if you only succeed in *stopping* me here, and make me lose my chance of getting away, the scandal to your friend will be greater still."

Mr. Hamlin looked at Van Loo curiously. There was a certain amount of conviction in what he said. He had never met this kind of creature before. He had surpassed even Hamlin's first intuition of his character. He amused and interested him. But Mr. Hamlin was also a man of the world, and knew that Van Loo's reasoning might be good. He put his hands in his pockets, and said gravely, "What *is* your little game?"

Van Loo had been seized with another inspiration of desperation. Steptoe had been partly responsible for this situation. Van Loo knew that Jack and Steptoe were not friends. He had certain secrets of Steptoe's that might be of importance to Jack. Why should he not try to make friends with this powerful free-lance and half-outlaw?

"It 's a game," he said significantly, "that might be of interest to your friends to hear."

Hamlin took his hands out of his pockets, turned on his heel, and said, "Come with me."

"But I must go by that coach now," said Van Loo desperately, "or — I 've told you what would happen."

"Come with me," said Jack coolly. "If I 'm satisfied with what you tell me, I 'll put you down at the next station an hour before that coach gets there."

"You swear it?" said Van Loo hesitatingly.

"I 've *said* it," returned Jack. "Come!" and Van Loo followed Mr. Hamlin into the station hotel.

CHAPTER VI

THE abrupt disappearance of Jack Hamlin and the strange lady and gentleman visitor was scarcely noticed by the other guests of the Divide House, and beyond the circle of Steptoe and his friends, who were a distinct party and strangers to the town, there was no excitement. Indeed, the hotel proprietor might have confounded them together, and perhaps Van Loo was not far wrong in his belief that their identity had not been suspected. Nor were Steptoe's followers very much concerned in an episode in which they had taken part only at the suggestion of their leader, and which had terminated so tamely. That they would have liked a "row," in which Jack Hamlin would have been incidentally forced to disgorge his winnings, there was no doubt, but that their interference was asked solely to gratify some personal spite of Steptoe's against Van Loo was equally plain to them. There was some grumbling and outspoken criticism of his methods.

This was later made more obvious by the arrival of another guest for whom Steptoe and his party were evidently waiting. He was a short, stout man, whose heavy red beard was trimmed a little more carefully than when he was first known to Steptoe as Alky Hall, the drunkard of Heavy Tree Hill. His dress, too, exhibited a marked improvement in quality and style, although still characterized in the waist and chest by the unbuttoned freedom of portly and slovenly middle age. Civilization had restricted his potations or limited them to certain festivals known as "sprees," and his face was less puffy and sodden. But with the accession of sobriety he had lost his good humor,

and had the irritability and intolerance of virtuous restraint.

"Ye need n't ladle out any of your forty-rod whiskey to me," he said querulously to Steptoe, as he filed out with the rest of the party through the bar-room into the adjacent apartment. "I want to keep my head level till our business is over, and I reckon it would n't hurt you and your gang to do the same. They 're less likely to blab; and there are few doors that whiskey won't unlock," he added, as Steptoe turned the key in the door after the party had entered.

The room had evidently been used for meetings of directors or political caucuses, and was roughly furnished with notched and whittled armchairs and a single long deal table, on which were ink and pens. The men sat down around it with a half-embarrassed, half-contemptuous attitude of formality, their bent brows and isolated looks showing little community of sentiment and scarcely an attempt to veil that individual selfishness that was prominent. Still less was there any essay of companionship or sympathy in the manner of Steptoe as he suddenly rapped on the table with his knuckles.

"Gentlemen," he said, with a certain deliberation of utterance, as if he enjoyed his own coarse directness, "I reckon you all have a sort of general idea what you were picked up for, or you would n't be here. But you may or may not know that for the present you are honest, hard-working miners, — the backbone of the State of Californy, — and that you have formed yourselves into a company called the 'Blue Jay,' and you 've settled yourselves on the Bar below Heavy Tree Hill, on a deserted claim of the Marshall Brothers, not half a mile from where the big strike was made five years ago. That 's what you *are*, gentlemen; that 's what you 'll continue *to be* until the job 's finished; and," he added, with a sudden dominance that

they all felt, "the man who forgets it will have to reckon with me. Now," he continued, resuming his former ironical manner, — "now, what are the cold facts of the case? The Marshalls worked this claim ever since '49, and never got anything out of it; then they dropped off or died out, leaving only one brother, Tom Marshall, to work what was left of it. Well, a few days ago *he* found indications of a big lead in the rock, and instead of rushin' out and yellin' like an honest man, and callin' in the boys to drink, he sneaks off to 'Frisco, and goes to the bank to get 'em to take a hand in it. Well, you know, when Jim Stacy takes a hand in anything, *it 's both hands*, and the bank would n't see it until he promised to guarantee possession of the whole abandoned claim, — 'dips, spurs, and angles,' — and let them work the whole thing, which the d—d fool *did*, and the bank agreed to send an expert down there to-morrow to report. But while he was away some one on our side, who was an expert also, got wind of it, and made an examination all by himself, and found it was a vein sure enough and a big thing, and some one else on our side found out, too, all that Marshall had promised the bank and what the bank had promised him. Now, gentlemen, when the bank sends down that expert to-morrow, I expect that he will find *you in possession* of every part of the deserted claim except the spot where Tom is still working."

"And what good is that to us?" asked one of the men contemptuously.

"Good?" repeated Steptoe harshly. "Well, if you 're not as d—d a fool as Marshall, you 'll see that if he has struck a lead or vein it 's bound to run across *our claims*, and what 's to keep us from sinking for it as long as Marshall has n't worked the other claims for years nor preëmpted them for this lead?"

"What 'll keep him from preëmpting now?"

"Our possession."

"But if he can prove that the brothers left their claims to him to keep, he 'll just send the sheriff and his posse down upon us," persisted the first speaker.

"It will take him three months to do that by law, and the sheriff and his posse can't do it before as long as we 're in peaceable possession of it. And by the time that expert and Marshall return they 'll find us in peaceful possession, unless we 're such blasted fools as to stay talking about it here!"

"But what 's to prevent Marshall from getting a gang of his own to drive us off?"

"Now you 're talkin' and not yelpin'," said Steptoe, with slow insolence. "D—d if I did n't begin to think you kalkilated I was goin' to employ you as lawyers! Nothing is to prevent him from gettin' up *his* gang, and we hope he 'll do it, for you see it puts us both on the same level before the law, for we 're both *breakin' it*. And we kalkilate that we 're as good as any roughs they can pick up at Heavy Tree."

"I reckon!" "Ye can count us in!" said half a dozen voices eagerly.

"But what 's the job goin' to pay us?" persisted a Sydney man. "An' arter we 've beat off this other gang, are we going to scrub along on grub wages until we 're yanked out by process-sarvers three months later? If that 's the ticket, I 'm not in it. I are n't no b—y quartz miner."

"We ain't going to do no more *mining* there than the bank," said Steptoe fiercely. "And the bank ain't going to wait no three months for the end of the lawsuit. They 'll float the stock of that mine for a couple of millions, and get out of it with a million before a month. And they 'll have to buy us off to do that. What they 'll pay will depend upon the lead; but we don't move off those claims for less than five thousand dollars, which will be two hun-

dred and fifty dollars to each man. But," said Steptoe in a lower but perfectly distinct voice, "if there should be a row, — and they *begin* it, — and in the scuffle Tom Marshall, their only witness, should happen to get in the way of a revolver or have his head caved in, there might be some difficulty in their holdin' *any of the mine* against honest, hard-working miners in possession. You hear me?"

There was a breathless silence for the moment, and a slight movement of the men in their chairs, but never in fear or protest. Every one had heard the speaker distinctly, and every man distinctly understood him. Some of them were criminals, one or two had already the stain of blood on their hands; but even the most timid, who at other times might have shrunk from suggested assassination, saw in the speaker's words only the fair removal of a natural enemy.

"All right, boys. I'm ready to wade in at once. Why ain't we on the road now? We might have been but for foolin' our time away on that man Van Loo."

"Van Loo!" repeated Hall eagerly, — "Van Loo! Was he here?"

"Yes," said Steptoe shortly, administering a kick under the table to Hall, as he had no wish to revive the previous irritability of his comrades. "He 's gone, but," turning to the others, "you 'd have had to wait for Mr. Hall's arrival, anyhow. And now you 've got your order you can start. Go in two parties by different roads, and meet on the other side of the hotel at Hymettus. I 'll be there before you. Pick up some shovels and drills as you go; remember you 're honest miners, but don't forget your shootin'-irons for all that. Now, scatter."

It was well that they did, vacating the room more cheerfully and sympathetically than they had entered it, or Hall's manifest disturbance over Van Loo's visit would have been noticed. When the last man had disappeared, Hall turned

quickly to Steptoe. "Well, what did he say? Where has he gone?"

"Don't know," said Steptoe, with uneasy curtness. "He was running away with a woman — well, Mrs. Barker, if you want to know," he added, with rising anger, "the wife of one of those cursed partners. Jack Hamlin was here, and was jockeying to stop him, and interfered. But what the devil has that job to do with our job?" He was losing his temper; everything seemed to turn upon this infernal Van Loo!

"He was n't running away with Mrs. Barker," gasped Hall, — "it was with her *money!* and the fear of being connected with the Wheat Trust swindle which he organized, and with our money which I lent him for the same purpose. And he knows all about that job, for I wanted to get him to go into it with us. Your name and mine ain't any too sweet-smelling for the bank, and we ought to have a middle-man who knows business to arrange with them. The bank dare n't object to him, for they 've employed him in even shadier transactions than this when *they* did n't wish to appear. *I* knew he was in difficulties along with Mrs. Barker's speculations, but I never thought him up to this. And," he added, with sudden desperation, "*you* trusted him, too."

In an instant Steptoe caught the frightened man by the shoulders and was bearing him down on the table. "Are you a traitor, a liar, or a besotted fool?" he said hoarsely. "Speak. *When* and *where* did I trust him?"

"You said in your note — I was — to — help him," gasped Hall.

"My note," repeated Steptoe, releasing Hall with astonished eyes.

"Yes," said Hall, tremblingly searching in his vest pocket. "I brought it with me. It is n't much of a note, but there 's your signature plain enough."

He handed Steptoe a torn piece of paper folded in a three-cornered shape. Steptoe opened it. He instantly recognized the paper on which he had written his name and sent up to his wife at the Boomville Hotel. But, added to it, in apparently the same hand, in smaller characters, were the words, "Help Van Loo all you can."

The blood rushed into his face. But he quickly collected himself, and said hurriedly, "All right, I had forgotten it. Let the d—d sneak go. We've got what's a thousand times better in this claim at Marshall's, and it's well that he isn't in it to scoop the lion's share. Only we must not waste time getting there now. You go there first, and at once, and set those rascals to work. I'll follow you before Marshall comes up. Get; I'll settle up here."

His face darkened once more as Hall hurried away, leaving him alone. He drew out the piece of paper from his pocket and stared at it again. Yes; it was the one he had sent to his wife. How did Van Loo get hold of it? Was he at the hotel that night? Had he picked it up in the hall or passage when the servant dropped it? When Hall handed him the paper and he first recognized it, a fiendish thought, followed by a spasm of more fiendish rage, had sent the blood to his face. But his crude common sense quickly dismissed that suggestion of his wife's complicity with Van Loo. But had she seen him passing through the hotel that night, and sought to draw from him some knowledge of his early intercourse with the child, and confessed everything, and even produced the paper with his signature as a proof of identity? Women had been known to do such desperate things. Perhaps she disbelieved her son's aversion to her, and was trying to sound Van Loo. As for the forged words by Van Loo, and the use he had put them to, he cared little. He believed the man was capable of forgery; indeed, he suddenly remembered that in the old days his son had spoken innocently, but admir-

ingly, of Van Loo's wonderful chirographical powers and his faculty of imitating the writings of others, and how he had even offered to teach him. A new and exasperating thought came into his feverish consciousness. What if Van Loo, in teaching the boy, had even made use of him as an innocent accomplice to cover up his own tricks! The suggestion was no question of moral ethics to Steptoe, nor of his son's possible contamination, although since the night of the big strike he had held different views; it was simply a fierce, selfish jealousy that *another* might have profited by the lad's helplessness and inexperience. He had been tormented by this jealousy before in his son's liking for Van Loo. He had at first encouraged his admiration and imitative regard for this smooth swindler's graces and accomplishments, which, though he scorned them himself, he was, after the common parental infatuation, willing that the boy should profit by. Incapable, through his own consciousness, of distinguishing between Van Loo's superficial polish and the true breeding of a gentleman, he had only looked upon it as an equipment for his son which might be serviceable to himself. He had told his wife the truth when he informed her of Van Loo's fears of being reminded of their former intimacy; but he had not told her how its discontinuance after they had left Heavy Tree Hill had affected her son, and how he still cherished his old admiration for that specious rascal. Nor had he told her how this had stung him, through his own selfish greed of the boy's affection. Yet now that it was possible that she had met Van Loo that evening, she might have become aware of Van Loo's power over her child. How she would exult, for all her pretended hatred of Van Loo! How, perhaps, they had plotted together! How Van Loo might have become aware of the place where his son was kept, and have been bribed by the mother to tell her! He stopped in a whirl of giddy fancies. His strong common sense in all other things had been hith-

erto proof against such idle dreams or suggestions; but the very strength of his parental love and jealousy had awakened in him at last the terrors of imagination.

His first impulse had been to seek his wife, regardless of discovery or consequences, at Hymettus, where she had said she was going. It was on his way to the rendezvous at Marshall's claim. But this he as instantly set aside. It was his *son* he must find; *she* might not confess, or might deceive him — the boy would not; and if his fears were correct, she could be arraigned afterwards. It was possible for him to reach the little Mission church and school, secluded in a remote valley by the old Franciscan fathers, where he had placed the boy for the last few years unknown to his wife. It would be a long ride, but he could still reach Heavy Tree Hill afterwards before Marshall and the expert arrived. And he had a feeling he had never felt before on the eve of a desperate adventure, — that he must see the boy first. He remembered how the child had often accompanied him in his flight, and how he had gained strength, and, it seemed to him, a kind of luck, from the touch of that small hand in his. Surely it was necessary now that at least his mind should be at rest regarding *him* on the eve of an affair of this moment. Perhaps he might never see him again. At any other time, and under the influence of any other emotion, he would have scorned such a sentimentalism, — he who had never troubled himself either with preparation for the future or consideration for the past. But at that moment he felt both. He drew a long breath. He could catch the next train to the Three Boulders and ride thence to San Felipe. He hurriedly left the room, settled with the landlord, and galloped to the station. By the irony of circumstances, the only horse available for that purpose was Mr. Hamlin's own.

By two o'clock he was at the Three Boulders, where he got a fast horse and galloped into San Felipe by four. As

he descended the last slope through the fastnesses of pines towards the little valley overlooked in its remoteness and purely pastoral simplicity by the gold-seeking immigrants, — its seclusion as one of the furthest northern Californian missions still preserved through its insignificance and the efforts of the remaining Brotherhood, who used it as an infirmary and a school for the few remaining Spanish families, — he remembered how he once blundered upon it with the boy while hotly pursued by a hue and cry from one of the larger towns, and how he found sanctuary there. He remembered how, when the pursuit was over, he had placed the boy there under the padre's charge. He had lied to his wife regarding the whereabouts of her son, but he had spoken truly regarding his free expenditure for the boy's maintenance, and the good fathers had accepted, equally for the child's sake as for the Church's sake, the generous "restitution" which this coarse, powerful, ruffianly looking father was apparently seeking to make. He was quite aware of it at the time, and had equally accepted it with grim cynicism; but it now came back to him with a new and smarting significance. Might *they*, too, not succeed in weaning the boy's affection from him, or if the mother had interfered, would they not side with her in claiming an equal right? He had sometimes laughed to himself over the security of this hiding-place, so unknown and so unlikely to be discovered by her, yet within easy reach of her friends and his enemies; he now ground his teeth over the mistake which his doting desire to keep his son accessible to him had caused him to make. He put spurs to his horse, dashed down the little, narrow, ill-paved street, through the deserted plaza, and pulled up in a cloud of dust before the only remaining tower, with its cracked belfry, of the half-ruined Mission church. A new dormitory and school-building had been extended from its walls, but in a subdued, harmonious, modest way, quite unlike the usual glaring white-pine glories

of provincial towns. Steptoe laughed to himself bitterly. Some of his money had gone into it.

He seized the horsehair rope dangling from a bell by the wall and rang it sharply. A soft-footed priest appeared, — Father Dominico. "Eddy Horncastle? Ah! yes. Eddy, dear child, is gone."

"Gone!" shouted Steptoe in a voice that startled the padre. "Where? When? With whom?"

"Pardon, señor, but for a time — only a pasear to the next village. It is his saint's day — he has half-holiday. He is a good boy. It is a little pleasure for him and for us."

"Oh!" said Steptoe, softened into a rough apology. "I forgot. All right. Has he had any visitors lately — lady, for instance?"

Father Dominico cast a look half of fright, half of reproval upon his guest.

"A lady *here!*"

In his relief Steptoe burst into a coarse laugh. "Of course; you see I forgot that, too. I was thinking of one of his woman folks, you know — relatives — aunts. Was there any other visitor?"

"Only one. Ah! we know the señor's rules regarding his son."

"One?" repeated Steptoe. "Who was it?"

"Oh, quite an hidalgo — an old friend of the child's — most polite, most accomplished, fluent in Spanish, perfect in deportment. The Señor Horncastle surely could find nothing to object to. Father Pedro was charmed with him. A man of affairs, and yet a good Catholic, too. It was a Señor Van Loo — Don Paul, the boy called him, and they talked of the boy's studies in the old days as if — indeed, but for the stranger being a caballero and man of the world — as if he had been his teacher."

It was a proof of the intensity of the father's feelings that

they had passed beyond the power of his usual coarse, brutal expression, and he only stared at the priest with a dull red face in which the blood seemed to have stagnated. Presently he said thickly, "When did he come?"

"A few days ago."

"Which way did Eddy go?"

"To Brown's Mills, scarcely a league away. He will be here — even now — on the instant. But the señor will come into the refectory and take some of the old Mission wine from the Catalan grape, planted one hundred and fifty years ago, until the dear child returns. He will be so happy."

"No! I'm in a hurry. I will go on and meet him." He took off his hat, mopped his crisp, wet hair with his handkerchief, and in a thick, slow, impeded voice, more suggestive than the outburst he restrained, said, "And as long as my son remains here that man, Van Loo, must not pass this gate, speak to him, or even see him. You hear me? See to it, you and all the others. See to it, I say, or" — He stopped abruptly, clapped his hat on the swollen veins of his forehead, turned quickly, passed out without another word through the archway into the road, and before the good priest could cross himself or recover from his astonishment, the thud of his horse's hoofs came from the dusty road.

It was ten minutes before his face resumed its usual color. But in that ten minutes, as if some of the struggle of his rider had passed into him, his horse was sweating with exhaustion and fear. For in that ten minutes, in this new imagination with which he was cursed, he had killed both Van Loo and his son, and burned the refectory over the heads of the treacherous priests. Then, quite himself again, a voice came to him from the rocky trail above the road with the hail of "Father!" He started quickly as a lad of fifteen or sixteen came bounding down the hillside, and ran towards him.

"You passed me and I called to you, but you did not seem to hear," said the boy breathlessly. "Then I ran after you. Have you been to the Mission?"

Steptoe looked at him quite as breathlessly, but from a deeper emotion. He was, even at first sight, a handsome lad, glowing with youth and the excitement of his run, and, as the father looked at him, he could see the likeness to his mother in his clear-cut features, and even a resemblance to himself in his square, compact chest and shoulders and crisp, black curls. A thrill of purely animal paternity passed over him, the fierce joy of his flesh over his own flesh! His own son, by God! They could not take *that* from him; they might plot, swindle, fawn, cheat, lie, and steal away his affections, but there he was, plain to all eyes, his own son, his very son!

"Come here," he said in a singular, half-weary and half-protesting voice, which the boy instantly recognized as his father's accents of affection.

The boy hesitated as he stood on the edge of the road and pointed with mingled mischief and fastidiousness to the depths of impalpable red dust that lay between him and the horseman. Steptoe saw that he was very smartly attired in holiday guise, with white duck trousers and patent leather shoes, and, after the Spanish fashion, wore black kid gloves. He certainly was a bit of a dandy, as he had said. The father's whole face changed as he wheeled and came before the lad, who lifted up his arms expectantly. They had often ridden together on the same horse.

"No rides to-day in that toggery, Eddy," he said in the same voice. "But I'll get down and we'll go and sit somewhere under a tree and have some talk. I've got a bit of a job that's hurrying me, and I can't waste time."

"Not one of your old jobs, father? I thought you had quite given that up?"

The boy spoke more carelessly than reproachfully, or

even wonderingly; yet, as he dismounted and tethered his horse, Steptoe answered evasively, "It 's a big thing, sonny; maybe we 'll make our eternal fortune, and then we 'll light out from this hole and have a gay time elsewhere. Come along."

He took the boy's gloved right hand in his own powerful grasp, and together they clambered up the steep hillside to a rocky ledge on which a fallen pine from above had crashed, snapped itself in twain, and then left its withered crown to hang half down the slope, while the other half rested on the ledge. On this they sat, looking down upon the road and the tethered horse. A gentle breeze moved the tree-tops above their heads, and the westering sun played hide-and-seek with the shifting shadows. The boy's face was quick and alert with all that moved round him, but without thought; the father's face was heavy, except for the eyes that were fixed upon his son.

"Van Loo came to the Mission," he said suddenly.

The boy's eyes glittered quickly, like a steel that pierced the father's heart. "Oh," he said simply, "then it was the padre told you?"

"How did he know you were here?" asked Steptoe.

"I don't know," said the boy quietly. "I think he said something, but I 've forgotten it. But it was mighty good of him to come, for I thought, you know, that he did not care to see me after Heavy Tree, and that he 'd gone back on us."

"What did he tell you?" continued Steptoe. "Did he talk of me or of your mother?"

"No," said the boy, but without any show of interest or sympathy; "we talked mostly about old times."

"Tell *me* about those old times, Eddy. You never told me anything about them."

The boy, momentarily arrested more by something in the tone of his father's voice — a weakness he had never

noticed before — than by any suggestion of his words, said with a laugh, "Oh, only about what we used to do when I was very little and used to call myself his 'little brother,' — don't you remember, long before the big strike on Heavy Tree? They were gay times we had then."

"And how he used to teach you to imitate other people's handwriting?" said Steptoe.

"What made you think of that, pop?" said the boy, with a slight wonder in his eyes. "Why, that's the very thing we *did* talk about."

"But you didn't do it again; you ain't done it since," said Steptoe quickly.

"Lord! no," said the boy contemptuously. "There ain't no chance now, and there wouldn't be any fun in it. It isn't like the old times when him and me were all alone, and we used to write letters as coming from other people to all the boys round Heavy Tree and the Bar, and sometimes as far as Boomville, to get them to do things, and they'd think the letters were real, and they'd do 'em. And there'd be the biggest kind of a row, and nobody ever knew who did it."

Steptoe stared at this flesh of his own flesh half in relief, half in frightened admiration. Sitting astride the log, his elbows on his knees and his gloved hands supporting his round cheeks, the boy's handsome face became illuminated with an impish devilry which the father had never seen before. With dancing eyes he went on. "It was one of those very games we played so long ago that he wanted to see me about and wanted me to keep mum about, for some of the folks that he played it on were around here now. It was a game we got off on one of the big strike partners long before the strike. I'll tell *you*, dad, for you know what happened afterwards, and you'll be glad. Well, that partner — Demorest — was a kind of silly, you remember — a sort of Miss Nancyish fellow — always gloomy and

lovesick after his girl in the States. Well, we 'd written lots of letters to girls from their chaps before, and got lots of fun out of it; but we had even a better show for a game here, for it happened that Van Loo knew all about the girl — things that even the man's own partners did n't, for Van Loo's mother was a sort of a friend of the girl's family, and traveled about with her, and knew that the girl was spoony over this Demorest, and that they corresponded. So, knowing that Van Loo was employed at Heavy Tree, she wrote to him to find out all about Demorest and how to stop their foolish nonsense, for the girl's parents did n't want her to marry a broken-down miner like him. So we thought we 'd do it our own way, and write a letter to her as if it was from him, don't you see? I wanted to make him call her awful names, and say that he hated her, that he was a murderer and a horse-thief, and that he had killed a policeman, and that he was thinking of becoming a Digger Injin, and having a Digger squaw for a wife, which he liked better than her. Lord! dad, you ought to have seen what stuff I made up." The boy burst into a shrill, half-feminine laugh, and Steptoe, catching the infection, laughed loudly in his own coarse, brutal fashion.

For some moments they sat there looking in each other's faces, shaking with sympathetic emotion, the father forgetting the purpose of his coming there, his rage over Van Loo's visit, and even the rendezvous to which his horse in the road below was waiting to bring him; the son forgetting their retreat from Heavy Tree Hill and his shameful vagabond wanderings with that father in the years that followed. The sinking sun stared blankly in their faces; the protecting pines above them, moved by a stronger gust, shook a few cones upon them; an enormous crow mockingly repeated the father's coarse laugh, and a squirrel scampered away from the strangely assorted pair as Steptoe, wiping his eyes and forehead with his pocket-handkerchief, said: —

"And did you send it?"

"Oh! Van Loo thought it too strong. Said that those sort of love-sick fools made more fuss over little things than they did over big things, and he sort of toned it down, and fixed it up himself. But it told. For there were never any more letters in the post-office in her handwriting, and there was n't any posted to her in his."

They both laughed again, and then Steptoe rose. "I must be getting along," he said, looking curiously at the boy. "I 've got to catch a train at Three Boulders Station."

"Three Boulders!" repeated the boy. "I 'm going there, too, on Friday, to meet Father Cipriano."

"I reckon my work will be all done by Friday," said Steptoe musingly. Standing thus, holding his boy's hand, he was thinking that the real fight at Marshall's would not take place at once, for it might take a day or two for Marshall to gather forces. But he only pressed his son's hand gently.

"I wish you would sometimes take me with you as you used to," said the boy curiously. "I 'm bigger now, and would n't be in your way."

Steptoe looked at the boy with a choking sense of satisfaction and pride. But he said, "No;" and then suddenly with simulated humor, "Don't you be taken in by any letters from *me*, such as you and Van Loo used to write. You hear?"

The boy laughed.

"And," continued Steptoe, "if anybody says I sent for you, don't you believe them."

"No," said the boy, smiling.

"And don't you even believe I 'm dead till you see me so. You understand. By the way, Father Pedro has some money of mine kept for you. Now hurry back to school and say you met me, but that I was in a great hurry. I reckon I may have been rather rough to the priests."

They had reached the lower road again, and Steptoe silently unhitched his horse. "Good-by," he said, as he laid his hand on the boy's arm.

"Good-by, dad."

He mounted his horse slowly. "Well," he said smilingly, looking down the road, "you ain't got anything more to say to me, have you?"

"No, dad."

"Nothin' you want?"

"Nothin', dad."

"All right. Good-by."

He put spurs to his horse and cantered down the road without looking back. The boy watched him with idle curiosity until he disappeared from sight, and then went on his way, whistling, and striking off the heads of the wayside weeds with his walking-stick.

CHAPTER VII

THE sun arose so brightly over Hymettus on the morning after the meeting of the three partners that it was small wonder that Barker's impressionable nature quickly responded to it, and, without awakening the still sleeping child, he dressed hurriedly, and was the first to greet it in the keen air of the slope behind the hotel. To his pantheistic spirit it had always seemed as natural for him to early welcome his returning brothers of the woods and hills as to say good-morning to his fellow mortals. And, in the joy of seeing Black Spur rising again to his level in the distance before him, he doffed his hat to it with a return of his old boyish habit, laid his arm caressingly around the great girth of the nearest pine, clapped his hands to the scampering squirrels in his path, and whistled to the dipping jays. In this way he quite forgot the more serious affairs of the preceding night, or, rather, saw them only in the gilding of the morning, until, looking up, he perceived the tall figure of Demorest approaching him; and then it struck him with his first glance at his old partner's face that his usual suave, gentle melancholy had been succeeded by a critical cynicism of look and a restrained bitterness of accent. Barker's loyal heart smote him for his own selfishness; Demorest had been hard hit by the discovery of the forgery and Stacy's concern in it, and had doubtless passed a restless night, while he (Barker) had forgotten all about it. "I thought of knocking at your door, as I passed," he said, with sympathetic apology, "but I was afraid I might disturb you. Is n't it glorious here? Quite like the old hill. Look at that lizard; he has n't moved since he first

saw me. Do you remember the one who used to steal our sugar, and then stiffen himself into stone on the edge of the bowl until he looked like an ornamental handle to it?" he continued, rebounding again into spirits.

"Barker," said Demorest abruptly, "what sort of woman is this Mrs. Van Loo, whose rooms I occupy?"

"Oh," said Barker, with optimistic innocence, "a most proper woman, old chap. White-haired, well-dressed, with a little foreign accent and a still more foreign courtesy. Why, you don't suppose we 'd" —

"But what is she like?" said Demorest impatiently.

"Well," said Barker thoughtfully, "she 's the kind of woman who might be Van Loo's mother, I suppose."

"You mean the mother of a forger and a swindler?" asked Demorest sharply.

"There are no mothers of swindlers and forgers," said Barker gravely, "in the way you mean. It 's only those poor devils," he said, pointing, nevertheless, with a certain admiration to a circling sparrow-hawk above him, "who have inherited instincts. What I mean is that she might be Van Loo's mother, because he did n't *select* her."

"Where did she come from? and how long has she been here?" asked Demorest.

"She came from abroad, I believe. And she came here just after you left. Van Loo, after he became secretary of the Ditch Company, sent for her and her daughter to keep house for him. But you 'll see her to-day or to-morrow probably, when she returns. I 'll introduce you; she 'll be rather glad to meet some one from abroad, and all the more if he happens to be rich and distinguished, and eligible for her daughter." He stopped suddenly in his smile, remembering Demorest's lifelong secret. But to his surprise his companion's face, instead of darkening as it was wont to do at any such allusion, brightened suddenly with a singular excitement as he answered dryly, "Ah, well, if the girl is pretty, who knows!"

Indeed, his spirits seemed to have returned with strange vivacity as they walked back to the hotel, and he asked many other questions regarding Mrs. Van Loo and her daughter, and particularly if the daughter had also been abroad. When they reached the veranda, they found a few early risers eagerly reading the Sacramento papers, which had just arrived, or, in little knots, discussing the news. Indeed, they would probably have stopped Barker and his companion had not Barker, anxious to relieve his friend's curiosity, hurried with him at once to the manager's office.

"Can you tell me exactly when you expect Mrs. Van Loo to return?" asked Barker quickly.

The manager with difficulty detached himself from the newspaper which he, too, was anxiously perusing, and said, with a peculiar smile, "Well, no! she *was* to return to-day, but if you're wanting to keep her rooms, I should say there would n't be any trouble about it, as she 'll hardly be coming back here *now*. She 's rather high and mighty in style, I know, and a determined sort of critter, but I reckon she and her daughter would n't care much to be waltzing round in public after what has happened."

"I don't understand you," said Demorest impatiently. "*What* has happened?"

"Have n't you heard the news?" said the manager in surprise. "It 's in all the Sacramento papers. Van Loo is a defaulter — has hypothecated everything he had and skedaddled."

Barker started. He was not thinking of the loss of his wife's money — only of *her* disappointment and mortification over it. Poor girl! Perhaps she was also worrying over his resentment, — as if she did not know him! He would go to her at once at Boomville. Then he remembered that she was coming with Mrs. Horncastle, and might be already on her way here by rail or coach, and he would miss her. Demorest in the meantime had seized a paper, and was intently reading it.

"There 's bad news, too, for your friend, your old partner," said the manager half sympathetically, half interrogatively. "There has been a drop out in everything the bank is carrying, and everybody is unloading. Two firms failed in 'Frisco yesterday that were carrying things for the bank, and have thrown everything back on it. There was an awful panic last night, and they say none of the big speculators know where they stand. Three of our best customers in the hotel rushed off to the bay this morning, but Stacy himself started before daylight, and got the through night express to stop for him on the Divide on signal. Shall I send any telegrams that may come to your room?"

Demorest knew that the manager suspected him of being interested in the bank, and understood the purport of the question. He answered, with calm surprise, that he was expecting no telegrams, and added, "But if Mrs. Van Loo returns I beg you to at once let me know," and taking Barker's arm he went in to breakfast. Seated by themselves, Demorest looked at his companion. "I 'm afraid, Barker boy, that this thing is more serious to Jim than we expected last night, or than he cared to tell us. And you, old man, I fear are hurt a little by Van Loo's flight. He had some money of your wife's, had n't he?"

Barker, who knew that the bulk of Demorest's fortune was in Stacy's hands, was touched at this proof of his unselfish thought, and answered with equal unselfishness that he was concerned only by the fear of Mrs. Barker's disappointment. "Why, Lord! Phil, whether she 's lost or saved her money, it 's nothing to me. I gave it to her to do what she liked with it, but I 'm afraid she 'll be worrying over what *I* think of it, — as if she did not know me! And I 'm half a mind, if it were not for missing her, to go over to Boomville, where she 's stopping."

"I thought you said she was in San Francisco?" said Demorest abstractedly.

Barker colored. "Yes," he answered quickly. "But I've heard since that she stopped at Boomville on the way."

"Then don't let *me* keep you here," returned Demorest. "For if Jim telegraphs to me I shall start for San Francisco at once, and I rather think he will. I did not like to say so before those panic-mongers outside who are stampeding everything; so run along, Barker boy, and ease your mind about the wife. We may have other things to think about soon."

Thus adjured, Barker rose from his half-finished breakfast and slipped away. Yet he was not quite certain what to do. His wife must have heard the news at Boomville as quickly as he had, and, if so, would be on her way with Mrs. Horncastle; or she might be waiting for him — knowing, too, that he had heard the news — in fear and trembling. For it was Barker's custom to endow all those he cared for with his own sensitiveness, and it was not like him to reflect that the woman who had so recklessly speculated against his opinion would scarcely fear his reproaches in her defeat. In the fullness of his heart he telegraphed to her in case she had not yet left Boomville: "All right. Have heard news. Understand perfectly. Don't worry. Come to me." Then he left the hotel by the stable entrance in order to evade the guests who had congregated on the veranda, and made his way to a little wooded crest which he knew commanded a view of the two roads from Boomville. Here he determined to wait and intercept her before she reached the hotel. He knew that many of the guests were aware of his wife's speculations with Van Loo, and that he was her broker. He wished to spare her running the gauntlet of their curious stares and comments as she drove up alone. As he was climbing the slope the coach from Sacramento dashed past him on the road below, but he knew that it had changed horses at Boomville at four o'clock, and that his

tired wife would not have availed herself of it at that hour, particularly as she could not have yet received the fateful news. He threw himself under a large pine, and watched the stagecoach disappear as it swept round into the courtyard of the hotel.

He sat there for some moments with his eyes bent upon the two forks of the red road that diverged below him, but which appeared to become whiter and more dazzling as he searched their distance. There was nothing to be seen except an occasional puff of dust which eventually revealed a horseman or a long trailing cloud out of which a solitary mule, one of a pack-train of six or eight, would momentarily emerge and be lost again. Then he suddenly heard his name called, and, looking up, saw Mrs. Horncastle, who had halted a few paces from him between two columns of the long-drawn aisle of pines.

In that mysterious half-light she seemed such a beautiful and goddess-like figure that his consciousness at first was unable to grasp anything else. She was always wonderfully well dressed, but the warmth and seclusion of this mountain morning had enabled her to wear a light gown of some delicate fabric which set off the grace of her figure, and even pardoned the rural coquetry of a silken sash around her still slender waist. An open white parasol thrown over her shoulder made a nimbus for her charming head and the thick coils of hair under her lace-edged hat. He had never seen her look so beautiful before. And that thought was so plainly in his frank face and eyes as he sprang to his feet that it brought a slight rise of color to her own cheek.

"I saw you climbing up here as I passed in the coach a few minutes ago," she said, with a smile, "and as soon as I had shaken the dust off, I followed you."

"Where 's Kitty ? " he stammered.

The color faded from her face as it had come, and a shade of something like reproach crept into her dark eyes.

And whatever it had been her purpose to say, or however carefully she might have prepared herself for this interview, she was evidently taken aback by the sudden directness of the inquiry. Barker saw this as quickly, and as quickly referred it to his own rudeness. His whole soul rushed in apology to his face as he said, "Oh, forgive me! I was anxious about Kitty; indeed, I had thought of coming again to Boomville, for you 've heard the news, of course? Van Loo is a defaulter, and has run away with the poor child's money."

Mrs. Horncastle had heard the news at the hotel. She paused a moment to collect herself, and then said slowly and tentatively, with a watchful intensity in her eyes, "Mrs. Barker went, I think, to the Divide" —

But she was instantly interrupted by the eager Barker. "I see. I thought of that at once. She went directly to the company's offices to see if she could save anything from the wreck before she saw me. It was like her, poor girl! And you — you," he went on eagerly, his whole face beaming with gratitude, — "you, out of your goodness, came here to tell me." He held out both hands and took hers in his.

For a moment Mrs. Horncastle was speechless and vacillating. She had often noticed before that it was part of the irony of the creation of such a simple nature as Barker's that he was not only open to deceit, but absolutely seemed to invite it. Instead of making others franker, people were inclined to rebuke his credulity by restraint and equivocation on their own part. But the evasion thus offered to her, although only temporary, was a temptation she could not resist. And it prolonged an interview that a ruthless revelation of the truth might have shortened.

"She did not tell me she was going there," she replied still evasively; "and, indeed," she added, with a burst of candor still more dangerous, "I only learned it from the

hotel clerk after she was gone. But I want to talk to you about her relations to Van Loo," she said, with a return of her former intensity of gaze, "and I thought we would be less subject to interruption here than at the hotel. Only I suppose everybody knows this place, and any of those flirting couples are likely to come here. Besides," she added, with a little half-hysterical laugh and a slight shiver, as she looked up at the high interlacing boughs above her head, "it's as public as the aisles of a church, and really one feels as if one were 'speaking out' in meeting. Isn't there some other spot a little more secluded, where we could sit down," she went on, as she poked her parasol into the usual black gunpowdery deposit of earth which mingled with the carpet of pine-needles beneath her feet, "and not get all sticky and dirty?"

Barker's eyes sparkled. "I know every foot of this hill, Mrs. Horncastle," he said, "and if you will follow me I'll take you to one of the loveliest nooks you ever dreamed of. It's an old Indian spring now forgotten, and I think known only to me and the birds. It's not more than ten minutes from here; only" — he hesitated as he caught sight of the smart French bronze buckled shoe and silken ankle which Mrs. Horncastle's gathering up of her dainty skirts around her had disclosed — "it may be a little rough and dusty going to your feet."

But Mrs. Horncastle pointed out that she had already irretrievably ruined her shoes and stockings in climbing up to him, — although Barker could really distinguish no diminution of their freshness, — and that she might as well go on. Whereat they both passed down the long aisle of slope to a little hollow of manzanita, which again opened to a view of Black Spur, but left the hotel hidden.

"What time did Kitty go?" began Barker eagerly, when they were half down the slope.

But here Mrs. Horncastle's foot slipped upon the glassy

pine-needles, and not only stopped an answer, but obliged Barker to give all his attention to keep his companion from falling again until they reached the open. Then came the plunge through the manzanita thicket, then a cool wade through waist-deep ferns, and then they emerged, holding each other's hand, breathless and panting before the spring.

It did not belie his enthusiastic description. A triangular hollow, niched in a shelf of the mountain-side, narrowed to a point from which the overflow of the spring percolated through a fringe of alder, to fall in what seemed from the valley to be a green furrow down the whole length of the mountain-side. Overhung by pines above, which met and mingled with the willows that everywhere fringed it, it made the one cooling shade in the whole basking expanse of the mountain, and yet was penetrated throughout by the intoxicating spice of the heated pines. Flowering reeds and long lush grasses drew a magic circle round an open bowl-like pool in the centre, that was always replenished to the slow murmur of an unseen rivulet that trickled from a white-quartz cavern in the mountain-side like a vein opened in its flank. Shadows of timid wings crossed it, quick rustlings disturbed the reeds, but nothing more. It was silent, but breathing; it was hidden to everything but the sky and the illimitable distance.

They threaded their way around it on the spongy carpet, covered by delicate lace-like vines that seemed to caress rather than trammel their moving feet, until they reached an open space before the pool. It was cushioned and matted with disintegrated pine bark, and here they sat down. Mrs. Horncastle furled her parasol and laid it aside; raised both hands to the back of her head and took two hat-pins out, which she placed in her smiling mouth; removed her hat, stuck the hat-pins in it, and handed it to Barker, who gently placed it on the top of a tall reed, where during the rest of that momentous meeting it swung and drooped like

a flower; removed her gloves slowly; drank still smilingly and gratefully nearly a wineglassful of the water which Barker brought her in the green twisted chalice of a lily leaf; looked the picture of happiness, and then burst into tears.

Barker was astounded, dismayed, even terror-stricken. Mrs. Horncastle crying! Mrs. Horncastle, the imperious, the collected, the coldly critical, the cynical, smiling woman of the world, actually crying! Other women might cry — Kitty had cried often — but Mrs. Horncastle! Yet, there she was, sobbing; actually sobbing like a schoolgirl, her beautiful shoulders rising and falling with her grief; crying unmistakably through her long white fingers, through a lace pocket-handkerchief which she had hurriedly produced and shaken from behind her like a conjurer's trick; her beautiful eyes a thousand times more lustrous for the sparkling beads that brimmed her lashes and welled over like the pool before her.

"Don't mind me," she murmured behind her handkerchief. "It's very foolish, I know. I was nervous — worried, I suppose; I'll be better in a moment. Don't notice me, please."

But Barker had drawn beside her and was trying, after the fashion of his sex, to take her handkerchief away in apparently the firm belief that this action would stop her tears. "But tell me what it is. Do, Mrs. Horncastle, please," he pleaded in his boyish fashion. "Is it anything I can do? Only say the word; only tell me *something!*"

But he had succeeded in partially removing the handkerchief, and so caught a glimpse of her wet eyes, in which a faint smile struggled out like sunshine through rain. But they clouded again, although she did n't cry, and her breath came and went with the action of a sob, and her hands still remained against her flushed face.

"I was only going to talk to you of Kitty" (sob) — "but I suppose I 'm weak" (sob) — "and such a fool" (sob)

— "and I got to thinking of myself and my own sorrows when I ought to be thinking only of you and Kitty."

"Never mind Kitty," said Barker impulsively. "Tell me about yourself — your own sorrows. I am a brute to have bothered you about her at such a moment; and now until you have told me what is paining you so, I shall not let you speak of her." He was perfectly sincere. What were Kitty's possible and easy tears over the loss of her money to the unknown agony that could wrench a sob from a woman like this? "Dear Mrs. Horncastle," he went on as breathlessly, "think of me now not as Kitty's husband, but as your true friend. Yes, as your *best* and *truest* friend, and speak to me as you would speak to him."

"You will be my friend?" she said suddenly and passionately, grasping his hand, "my best and truest friend? and if I tell you all, — everything, you will not cast me from you and hate me?"

Barker felt the same thrill from her warm hand slowly possess his whole being as it had the evening before, but this time he was prepared and answered the grasp and her eyes together as he said breathlessly, "I will be — I *am* your friend."

She withdrew her hand and passed it over her eyes. After a moment she caught his hand again, and, holding it tightly as if she feared he might fly from her, bit her lip, and then slowly, without looking at him, said, "I lied to you about myself and Kitty that night; I did not come with her. I came alone and secretly to Boomville to see — to see the man who is my husband."

"Your husband!" said Barker in surprise. He had believed, with the rest of the world, that there had been no communication between them for years. Yet so intense was his interest in her that he did not notice that this revelation was leaving now no excuse for his wife's presence at Boomville.

Mrs. Horncastle went on with dogged bitterness, "Yes, my husband. I went to him to beg and bribe him to let me see my child. Yes, *my* child," she said frantically, tightening her hold upon his hand, "for I lied to you when I once told you I had none. I had a child, and, more than that, a child who at his birth I did not dare to openly claim."

She stopped breathlessly, staring at his face with her former intensity as if she would pluck the thought that followed from his brain. But he only moved closer to her, passed his arm over her shoulders with a movement so natural and protecting that it had a certain dignity in it, and, looking down upon her bent head with eyes brimming with sympathy, whispered, "Poor, poor child!"

Whereat Mrs. Horncastle again burst into tears. And then, with her head half drawn towards his shoulder, she told him all, — all that had passed between her and her husband, — even all that they had then but hinted at. It was as if she felt she could now, for the first time, voice all these terrible memories of the past which had come back to her last night when her husband had left her. She concealed nothing, she veiled nothing; there were intervals when her tears no longer flowed, and a cruel hardness and return of her old imperiousness of voice and manner took their place, as if she was doing a rigid penance and took a bitter satisfaction in laying bare her whole soul to him. "I never had a friend," she whispered; "there were women who persecuted me with their jealous sneers; there were men who persecuted me with their selfish affections. When I first saw *you*, you seemed something so apart and different from all other men that, although I scarcely knew you, I wanted to tell you, even then, all that I have told you now. I wanted you to be my friend; something told me that you could — that you could separate me from my past; that you could tell me what to do; that you could make me

think as you thought, see life as *you* saw it, and trust always to some goodness in people as *you* did. And in this faith I thought that you would understand me now, and even forgive me all."

She made a slight movement as if to disengage his arm, and, possibly, to look into his eyes, which she knew instinctively were bent upon her downcast head. But he only held her the more tightly until her cheek was close against his breast. "What could I do?" she murmured. "A man in sorrow and trouble may go to a woman for sympathy and support and the world will not gainsay or misunderstand him. But a woman — weaker, more helpless, credulous, ignorant, and craving for light — must not in her agony go to a man for succor and sympathy."

"Why should she not?" burst out Barker passionately, releasing her in his attempt to gaze into her face. "What man dare refuse her?"

"Not *that*," she said slowly, but with still averted eyes, "but because the world would say she *loved* him."

"And what should she care for the opinion of a world that stands aside and lets her suffer? Why should she heed its wretched babble?" he went on, in flashing indignation.

"Because," she said faintly, lifting her moist eyes and moist and parted lips towards him, — "because it would be *true!*"

There was a silence so profound that even the spring seemed to withhold its song as their eyes and lips met. When the spring recommenced its murmur, and they could hear the droning of a bee above them and the rustling of the reed, she was murmuring, too, with her face against his breast: "You did not think it strange that I should follow you — that I should risk everything to tell you what I have told you before I told you anything else? You will never hate me for it, George?"

There was another silence still more prolonged, and when he looked again into the flushed face and glistening eyes he was saying, "I have *always* loved you. I know now I loved you from the first, from the day when I leaned over you to take little Sta from your lap and saw your tenderness for him in your eyes. I could have kissed you *then*, dearest, as I do now."

"And," she said, when she had gained her breath again, "you will always remember, George, that you told me this *before* I told you anything of her."

"*Her?* Of whom, dearest?" he asked, leaning over her tenderly.

"Of Kitty — of your wife," she said impatiently, as she drew back shyly with her former intense gaze.

He did not seem to grasp her meaning, but said gravely, "Let us not talk of her *now*. Later we shall have *much* to say of her. For," he added quietly, "you know I must tell her all."

The color faded from her cheek. "Tell her all!" she repeated vacantly; then suddenly she turned upon him eagerly, and said, "But what if she is gone?"

"Gone?" he repeated.

"Yes; gone. What if she has run away with Van Loo? What if she has disgraced you and her child?"

"What do you mean?" he said, seizing both her hands and gazing at her fixedly.

"I mean," she said, with a half-frightened eagerness, 'that she has already gone with Van Loo. George! George!" she burst out suddenly and passionately, falling upon her knees before him, "do you think that I would have followed you here and told you what I did if I thought that she had now the slightest claim upon your love or honor? Don't you understand me? I came to tell you of her flight to Boomville with that man; how I accidentally intercepted them there; how I tried to save her from

him, and even lied to you to try to save her from your indignation; but how she deceived me as she has you, and even escaped and joined her lover while you were with me. I came to tell you that and nothing more, George, I swear it. But when you were kind to me and pitied me, I was mad — wild! I wanted to win you first out of your own love. I wanted you to respond to *mine* before you knew your wife was faithless. Yet I would have saved her if I could. Listen, George! A moment more before you speak!"

Then she hurriedly told him all; the whole story of his wife's dishonor, from her entrance into the sitting-room with Van Loo, her later appeal for concealment from her husband's unexpected presence, to the use she made of that concealment to fly with her lover. She spared no detail, and even repeated the insult Mrs. Barker had cast upon her with the triumphant reproach that her husband would not believe her. "Perhaps," she added bitterly, "you may not believe me now. I could even stand that from you, George, if it could make you happier; but you would still have to believe it from others. The people at the Boomville Hotel saw them leave it together."

"I do believe you," he said slowly, but with downcast eyes, "and if I did not love you before you told me this, I could love you now for the part you have taken; but" — He stopped.

"You love her still," she burst out, "and I might have known it. Perhaps," she went on distractedly, "you love her the more that you have lost her. It is the way of men — and women."

"If I had loved her truly," said Barker, lifting his frank eyes to hers, "I could not have touched *your* lips. I could not even have wished to — as I did three years ago — as I did last night. Then I feared it was my weakness, now I know it was my love. I have thought of it ever since,

even while waiting my wife's return here, knowing that I did not and never could have loved her. But for that very reason I must try to save her for her own sake, if I cannot save her for mine; and if I fail, dearest, it shall not be said that we climbed to happiness over her back bent with the burden of her shame. If I loved you and told you so, thinking her still guiltless and innocent, how could I profit now by her fault?"

Mrs. Horncastle saw too late her mistake. "Then you would take her back?" she said frenziedly.

"To my home — which is hers — yes. To my heart — no. She never was there."

"And *I*," said Mrs. Horncastle, with a quivering lip, — "where do *I* go when you have settled this? Back to my past again? Back to my husbandless, childless life?"

She was turning away, but Barker caught her in his arms again. "No!" he said, his whole face suddenly radiating with hope and youthful enthusiasm. "No! Kitty will help us; we will tell her all. You do not know her, dearest, as I do — how good and kind she is, in spite of all. We will appeal to her; she will devise some means by which, without the scandal of a divorce, she and I may be separated. She will take dear little Sta with her — it is only right, poor girl; but she will let me come and see him. She will be a sister to us, dearest. Courage! All will come right yet. Trust to me."

An hysterical laugh came to Mrs. Horncastle's lips and then stopped. For as she looked up at him in his supreme hopefulness, his divine confidence in himself and others, — at his handsome face beaming with love and happiness, and his clear gray eyes glittering with an almost spiritual prescience, — she, woman of the world and bitter experience, and perfectly cognizant of her own and Kitty's possibilities, was, nevertheless, completely carried away by her lover's optimism. For of all optimism that of love is the most

convincing. Dear boy! — for he was but a boy in experience — only his love for her could work this magic. So she gave him kiss for kiss, largely believing, largely hoping, that Mrs. Barker was in love with Van Loo and would *not* return. And in this hope an invincible belief in the folly of her own sex soothed and sustained her.

"We must go now, dearest," said Barker, pointing to the sun already near the meridian. Three hours had fled, they knew not how. "I will lead you back to the hill again, but there we had better separate, you taking your way alone to the hotel as you came, and I will go a little way on the road to the Divide and return later. Keep your own counsel about Kitty for her sake and ours; perhaps no one else may know the truth yet." With a farewell kiss they plunged again hand in hand through the cool bracken and again through the hot manzanita bushes, and so parted on the hilltop, as they had never parted before, leaving their whole world behind them.

Barker walked slowly along the road under the flickering shade of wayside sycamore, his sensitive face also alternating with his thought in lights and shadows. Presently there crept towards him out of the distance a halting, vacillating, deviating buggy, trailing a cloud of dust after it like a broken wing. As it came nearer he could see that the horse was spent and exhausted, and that the buggy's sole occupant — a woman — was equally exhausted in her monotonous attempt to urge it forward with whip and reins that rose and fell at intervals with feeble reiteration. Then he stepped out of the shadow and stood in the middle of the sunlit road to await it. For he recognized his wife.

The buggy came nearer. And then the most exquisite pang he had ever felt at his wife's hands shot through him. For as she recognized him she made a wild but impotent attempt to dash past him, and then as suddenly pulled up in the ditch.

He went up to her. She was dirty, she was disheveled, she was haggard, she was plain. There were rings of dust round her tear-swept eyes and smudges of dust-dried perspiration over her fair cheek. He thought of the beauty, freshness, and elegance of the woman he had just left, and an infinite pity swept the soul of this weak-minded gentleman. He ran towards her, and tenderly lifting her in her shame-stained garments from the buggy, said hurriedly, "I know it all, poor Kitty! You heard the news of Van Loo's flight, and you ran over to the Divide to try and save some of your money. Why did n't you wait? Why did n't you tell me?"

There was no mistaking the reality of his words, the genuine pity and tenderness of his action; but the woman saw before her only the familiar dupe of her life, and felt an infinite relief mingled with a certain contempt for his weakness and anger at her previous fears of him.

"You might have driven over, then, yourself," she said in a high, querulous voice, "if you knew it so well, and have spared *me* this horrid, dirty, filthy, hopeless expedition, for I have not saved anything — there! And I have had all this disgusting bother!"

For an instant he was sorely tempted to lift his eyes to her face, but he checked himself; then he gently took her dust-coat from her shoulders and shook it out, wiped the dust from her face and eyes with his own handkerchief, held her hat and blew the dust from it with a vivid memory of performing the same service for Mrs. Horncastle only an hour before, while she arranged her hair; and then, lifting her again into the buggy, said quietly, as he took his seat beside her and grasped the reins: —

"I will drive you to the hotel by way of the stables, and you can go at once to your room and change your clothes. You are tired, you are nervous and worried, and want rest. Don't tell me anything now until you feel quite yourself again."

He whipped up the horse, who, recognizing another hand at the reins, lunged forward in a final effort, and in a few minutes they were at the hotel.

As Mrs. Horncastle sat at luncheon in the great dining-room, a little pale and abstracted, she saw Mrs. Barker sweep confidently into the room, fresh, rosy, and in a new and ravishing toilet. With a swift glance of conscious power towards the other guests she walked towards Mrs. Horncastle. "Ah, here you are, dear," she said in a voice that could easily reach all ears, "and you 've arrived only a little before me, after all. And I 've had such an *awful* drive to the Divide! And only think! poor George telegraphed to me at Boomville not to worry, and his dispatch has only just come back here."

And with a glance of complacency she laid Barker's gentle and forgiving dispatch before the astonished Mrs. Horncastle.

CHAPTER VIII

As the day advanced the excitement over the financial crisis increased at Hymettus, until, in spite of its remote and peaceful isolation, it seemed to throb through all its verandas and corridors with some pulsation from the outer world. Besides the letters and dispatches brought by hurried messengers and by coach from the Divide, there was a crowd of guests and servants around the branch telegraph at the new Heavy Tree post-office which was constantly augmenting. Added to the natural anxiety of the deeply interested was the stimulated fever of the few who wished to be "in the fashion." It was early rumored that a heavy operator, a guest of the hotel, who was also a director in the telegraph company, had bought up the wires for his sole use, that the dispatches were doctored in his interests as a "bear," and there was wild talk of lynching by the indignant mob. Passengers from Sacramento, San Francisco, and Marysville brought incredible news and the wildest sensations. Firm after firm had failed in the great cities. Old established houses that dated back to the "spring of '49," and had weathered the fires and inundations of their perilous Californian infancy, collapsed before this mysterious, invisible, impalpable breath of panic. Companies rooted in respectability and sneered at for old-fashioned ways were discovered to have shamelessly speculated with trusts! An eminent deacon and pillar of the church was found dead in his room with a bullet in his heart and a damning confession on the desk before him! Foreign bankers were sending their gold out of the country; government would be appealed to, to open the vaults of the Mint; there would

be an embargo on all bullion shipment! Nothing was too wild or preposterous to be repeated or credited.

And with this fever of sordid passion the summer temperature had increased. For the last two weeks the thermometer had stood abnormally high during the day-long sunshine; and the metallic dust in the roads over mineral ranges pricked the skin like red-hot needles. In the deepest woods the aromatic sap stood in beads on felled logs and splintered tree-shafts; even the mountain night breeze failed to cool these baked and heated fastnesses. There were ominous clouds of smoke by day that were pillars of fire by night along the distant valleys. Some of the nearer crests were etched against the midnight sky by dull red creeping lines like a dying firework. The great hotel itself creaked and crackled and warped through all its painted, blistered, and veneered expanse, and was filled with the stifling breath of desiccation. The stucco cracked and crumbled away from the cornices; there were yawning gaps in the boarded floors beneath the Turkey carpets. Plate-glass windows became hopelessly fixed in their warped and twisted sashes, and added to the heat; there was a warm incense of pine sap in the dining-room that flavored all the cuisine. And yet the babble of stocks and shares went on, and people pricked their ears over their soup to catch the gossip of the last arrival.

Demorest, loathing it all in his new-found bitterness, was nevertheless impatient in his inaction, and was eagerly awaiting a telegram from Stacy; Barker had disappeared since luncheon. Suddenly there was a commotion on the veranda as a carriage drove up with a handsome, gray-haired woman. In the buzzing of voices around him Demorest heard the name of Mrs. Van Loo. In further comments, made in more smothered accents, he heard that Van Loo had been stopped at Cañon Station, but that no warrant had yet been issued against him; that it was generally believed

that the bank dared not hold him; that others openly averred that he had been used as a scapegoat to avert suspicion from higher guilt. And certainly Mrs. Van Loo's calm, confident air seemed to corroborate these assertions.

He was still wondering if the strange coincidence which had brought both mother and son into his own life was not merely a fancy, as far as *she* was concerned, when a waiter brought a message from Mrs. Van Loo that she would be glad to see him for a few moments in her room. Last night he could scarcely have restrained his eagerness to meet her and elucidate the mystery of the photograph; now he was conscious of an equally strong revulsion of feeling, and a dull premonition of evil. However, it was no doubt possible that the man had told her of his previous inquiries, and she had merely acknowledged them by that message.

Demorest found Mrs. Van Loo in the private sitting-room where he and his old partners had supped on the preceding night. She received him with unmistakable courtesy and even a certain dignity that might or might not have been assumed. He had no difficulty in recognizing the son's mechanical politeness in the first, but he was puzzled at the second.

"The manager of this hotel," she began, with a foreigner's precision of English, "has just told me that you were at present occupying my rooms at his invitation, but that you wished to see me at once on my return, and I believe that I was not wrong in apprehending that you preferred to hear my wishes from my own lips rather than from an inn-keeper. I had intended to keep these rooms for some weeks, but, unfortunately for me, though fortunately for you, the present terrible financial crisis, which has most unjustly brought my son into such scandalous prominence, will oblige me to return to San Francisco until his reputation is fully cleared of these foul aspersions. I shall only ask you to allow me the undisturbed possession of these rooms for a couple of

hours until I can pack my trunks and gather up a few souvenirs that I almost always keep with me."

"Pray, consider that your wishes are my own in respect to that, my dear madam," returned Demorest gravely, "and that, indeed, I protested against even this temporary intrusion upon your apartments; but I confess that now that you have spoken of your souvenirs, I have the greatest curiosity about one of them, and that even my object in seeking this interview was to gratify it. It is in regard to a photograph which I saw on the chimney-piece in your bedroom, which I think I recognized as that of some one whom I formerly knew."

There was a sudden look of sharp suspicion and even hard aggressiveness that quite changed the lady's face as he mentioned the word "souvenir," but it quickly changed to a smile as she put up her fan with a gesture of arch deprecation, and said: —

"Ah! I see. Of course, a lady's photograph."

The reply irritated Demorest. More than that, he felt a sudden sense of the absolute sentimentality of his request, and the consciousness that he was about to invite the familiar confidence of this strange woman — whose son had forged his name — in regard to *her!*

"It was a Venetian picture," he began, and stopped, a singular disgust keeping him from voicing the name.

But Mrs. Van Loo was less reticent. "Oh, you mean my dearest friend — a lovely picture, and you know her? Why, yes, surely. You are *the* Mr. Demorest who — Of course, that old love-affair. Well, you are a marvel! Five years ago, at least, and you have not forgotten! I really must write and tell her."

"Write and tell her!" Then it was all a lie about her death! He felt not only his faith, his hope, his future leaving him, but even his self-control. With an effort he said: —

"I think you have already satisfied my curiosity. I was told five years ago that she was dead. It was because of the date of the photograph — two years later — that I ventured to intrude upon you. I was anxious only to know the truth."

"She certainly was very much living and of the world when I saw her last, two years ago," said Mrs. Van Loo, with an easy smile. "I dare say that was a ruse of her relatives — a very stupid one — to break off the affair, for I think they had other plans. But, dear me! now I remember, was there not some little quarrel between you before? Some letter from you that was not very kind? My impression is that there was something of the sort, and that the young lady was indignant. But only for a time, you know. She very soon forgot it. I dare say if you wrote something very charming to her, it might not be too late. We women are very forgiving, Mr. Demorest, and although she is very much sought after, as are all young American girls whose fathers can give them a comfortable *dot*, her parents might be persuaded to throw over a poor prince for a rich countryman in the end. Of course, you know, to you Republicans there is always something fascinating in titles and blood, and our dear friend is like other girls. Still, it is worth the risk. And five years of waiting and devotion really ought to tell. It's quite a romance! Shall I write to her and tell her I have seen you, looking well and prosperous? Nothing more. Do let me! I should be delighted."

"I think it hardly worth while for you to give yourself that trouble," said Demorest quietly, looking in Mrs. Van Loo's smiling eyes, "now that I know the story of the young lady's death was a forgery. And I will not intrude further on your time. Pray give yourself no needless hurry over your packing. I may go to San Francisco this afternoon, and not even require the rooms to-night."

"At least, let me make you a present of the souvenir as an acknowledgment of your courtesy," said Mrs. Van Loo, passing into her bedroom and returning with the photograph. "I feel that with your five years of constancy it is more yours than mine." As a gentleman Demorest knew he could not refuse, and taking the photograph from her with a low bow, with another final salutation he withdrew.

Alone by himself in a corner of the veranda he was surprised that the interview had made so little impression on him, and had so little altered his conviction. His discovery that the announcement of his betrothed's death was a fiction did not affect the fact that though living she was yet dead to him, and apparently by her own consent. The contrast between her life and his during those five years had been covertly accented by Mrs. Van Loo, whether intentionally or not, and he saw again as last night the full extent of his sentimental folly. He could not even condole with himself that he was the victim of miserable falsehoods that others had invented. *She* had accepted them, and had even excused her desertion of him by that last deceit of the letter.

He drew out her photograph and again examined it, but not as a lover. Had she really grown stouter and more self-complacent? Was the spirituality and delicacy he had worshiped in her purely his own idiotic fancy? Had she always been like this? Yes. There was the girl who could weakly strive, weakly revenge herself, and weakly forget. There was the figure that he had expected to find carved upon the tomb which he had long sought that he might weep over. He laughed aloud.

It was very hot, and he was stifling with inaction. What was Barker doing, and why had not Stacy telegraphed to him? And what were those people in the courtyard doing? Were they discussing news of further disaster and ruin? Perhaps he was even now a beggar. Well, his fortune might go with his faith.

But the crowd was simply looking at the roof of the hotel, and he now saw that a black smoke was drifting across the courtyard, and was conscious of a smell of soot and burning. He stepped down from the veranda among the mingled guests and servants, and saw that the smoke was only pouring from a chimney. He heard, too, that the chimney had been on fire, and that it was Mrs. Van Loo's bedroom chimney, and that when the startled servants had knocked at the locked door she had told them that she was only burning some old letters and newspapers, the refuse of her trunks. There was naturally some indignation that the hotel had been so foolishly endangered, in such scorching weather, and the manager had had a scene with her which resulted in her leaving the hotel indignantly with her half-packed boxes. But even after the smoke had died away and the fire been extinguished in the chimney and hearth, there was an acrid smell of smouldering pine penetrating the upper floors of the hotel all that afternoon.

When Mrs. Van Loo drove away, the manager returned with Demorest to the rooms. The marble hearth was smoked and discolored, and still littered with charred ashes of burnt paper. "My belief is," said the manager darkly, "that the old hag came here just to burn up a lot of incriminating papers that her son had intrusted to her keeping. It looks mighty suspicious. You see she got up an awful lot of side when I told her I did n't reckon to run a smelting furnace in a wooden hotel with the thermometer at one hundred in the office, and I reckon it was just an excuse for getting off in a hurry."

But the continued delay in Stacy's promised telegram had begun to work upon Demorest's usual equanimity, and he scarcely listened in his anxiety for his old partner. He knew that Stacy should have arrived in San Francisco by noon. He had almost determined to take the next train

from the Divide, when two horsemen dashed into the courtyard. There was the usual stir on the veranda and rush for news, but the two new arrivals turned out to be Barker, on a horse covered with foam, and a dashing, elegantly dressed stranger on a mustang as carefully groomed and as spotless as himself. Demorest instantly recognized Jack Hamlin.

He had not seen Hamlin since that day, five years before, when the latter had accompanied the three partners with their treasure to Boomville, and had handed him the mysterious packet. As the two men dismounted hurriedly and moved towards him, he felt a premonition of something as fateful and important as then. In obedience to a sign from Barker he led them to a more secluded angle of the veranda. He could not help noticing that his younger partner's face was mobile as ever, but more thoughtful and older; yet his voice rang with the old freemasonry of the camp, as he said, with a laugh, "The signal has been given, and it 's boot and saddle and away."

"But I have had no dispatch from Stacy," said Demorest in surprise. "He was to telegraph to me from San Francisco in any emergency."

"He never got there at all," said Barker. "Jack ran slap into Van Loo at the Divide, and sent a dispatch to Jim, which stopped him halfway until Jack could reach him, which he nearly broke his neck to do; and then Jack finished up by bringing a message from Stacy to us that we should all meet together on the slope of Heavy Tree, near the Bar. I met Jack just as I was riding into the Divide, and came back with him. He will tell you the rest, and you can swear by what Jack says, for he 's white all through," he added, laying his hand affectionately on Hamlin's shoulder.

Hamlin winced slightly. For he had *not* told Barker that his wife was with Van Loo, nor his first reason for

interfering. But he related how he had finally overtaken Van Loo at Cañon Station, and how the fugitive had disclosed the conspiracy of Steptoe and Hall against the bank and Marshall as the price of his own release. On this news, remembering that Stacy had passed the Divide on his way to the station, he had first sent a dispatch to him, and then met him at the first station on the road. "I reckon, gentlemen," said Hamlin, with an unusual earnestness in his voice, "that he'd not only got my telegram, but *all the news* that had been flying around this morning, for he looked like a man to whom it was just a 'toss-up' whether he took his own life then and there, or was willing to have somebody else take it for him, for he said, 'I'll go myself,' and telegraphed to have the surveyor stopped from coming. Then he told me to tell you fellows, and ask you to come too." Jack paused, and added half mischievously, "He sort of asked *me* what I would take to stand by him in the row, if there was one, and I told him I'd take — whiskey! You see, boys, it's a kind of off-night with me, and I would n't mind for the sake of old times to finish the game with old Steptoe that I began a matter of five years ago."

"All right," said Demorest, with a kindling eye; "I suppose we'd better start at once. One moment," he added. "Barker boy, will you excuse me if I speak a word to Hamlin?" As Barker nodded and walked to the rails of the veranda, Demorest took Hamlin aside. "You and I," he said hurriedly, "are *single* men; Barker has a wife and child. This is likely to be no child's play."

But Jack Hamlin was no fool, and from certain leading questions which Barker had already put, but which he had skillfully evaded, he surmised that Barker knew something of his wife's escapade. He answered a little more seriously than his wont, "I don't think as regards *his wife* that it would make much difference to him or her how stiff the work was."

Demorest turned away with his last pang of bitterness. It needed only this confirmation of all that Stacy had hinted, of what he himself had seen in his brief interview with Mrs. Barker since his return, to shake his last remaining faith. "We 'll all go together, then," he said, with a laugh, "as in the old times, and perhaps it 's as well that we have no woman in our confidence."

An hour later the three men passed quietly out of the hotel, scarcely noticed by the other guests, who were also oblivious of their absence during the evening. For Mrs. Barker, quite recovered from her fatiguing ride, was in high spirits and the most beautiful and spotless of summer gowns, and was considered quite a heroine by the other ladies as she dwelt upon the terrible heat of her return journey. "Only I knew Mr. Barker would be worried, — and the poor man actually walked a mile down the Divide road to meet me, — I believe I should have stayed there all day." She glanced round the other groups for Mrs. Horncastle, but that lady had retired early. Possibly she alone had noticed the absence of the two partners.

The guests sat up until quite late, for the heat seemed to grow still more oppressive, and the strange smell of burning wood revived the gossip about Mrs. Van Loo and her stupidity in setting fire to her chimney. Some averred that it would be days before the smell could be got out of the house; others referred it to the fires in the woods, which were now dangerously near. One spoke of the isolated position of the hotel as affording the greatest security, but was met by the assertion of a famous mountaineer that the forest fires were wont to leap from crest to crest mysteriously, without any apparent continuous contact. This led to more or less light-hearted conjecture of present danger and some amusing stories of hotel fires and their ludicrous revelations. There were also some entertaining speculations as to what they would do and what they would try to save in such an emergency.

"For myself," said Mrs. Barker audaciously, "I should certainly let Mr. Barker look after Sta, and confine myself entirely to getting away with my diamonds. I know the wretch would never think of them."

It was still later when, exhausted by the heat and some reaction from the excitement of the day, they at last deserted the veranda for their rooms, and for a while the shadowy bulk of the whole building was picked out with regularly spaced lights from its open windows, until now these finally faded and went out one by one. An hour later the whole building had sunk to rest. It was said that it was only four in the morning when a yawning porter, having put out the light in a dark, upper corridor, was amazed by a dull glow from the top of the wall, and awoke to the fact that a red fire, as yet smokeless and flameless, was creeping along the cornice. He ran to the office and gave the alarm; but on returning with assistance was stopped in the corridor by an impenetrable wall of smoke veined with murky flashes. The alarm was given in all the lower floors, and the occupants rushed from their beds half dressed to the courtyard, only to see, as they afterwards averred, the flames burst like cannon discharges from the upper windows and unite above the crackling roof. So sudden and complete was the catastrophe, although slowly prepared by a leak in the overheated chimney between the floors, that even the excitement of fear and exertion was spared the survivors. There was bewilderment and stupor, but neither uproar nor confusion. People found themselves wandering in the woods, half awake and half dressed, having descended from the balconies and leaped from the windows, — they knew not how. Others on the upper floor neither awoke nor moved from their beds, but were suffocated without a cry. From the first an instinctive idea of the hopelessness of combating the conflagration possessed them all; to a blind, automatic feeling to flee the building was added the slow mechanism of the

somnambulist; delicate women walked speechlessly, but securely, along ledges and roofs from which they would have fallen by the mere light of reason and of day. There was no crowding or impeding haste in their dumb exodus. It was only when Mrs. Barker awoke disheveled in the courtyard, and with an hysterical outcry rushed back into the hotel, that there was any sign of panic.

Mrs. Horncastle, who was standing near, fully dressed as from some night-long vigil, quickly followed her. The half-frantic woman was making directly for her own apartments, whose windows those in the courtyard could see were already belching smoke. Suddenly Mrs. Horncastle stopped with a bitter cry and clasped her forehead. It had just flashed upon her that Mrs. Barker had told her only a few hours before that Sta had been removed with the nurse to the *upper floor!* It was not the forgotten child that Mrs. Barker was returning for, but her diamonds! Mrs. Horncastle called her; she did not reply. The smoke was already pouring down the staircase. Mrs. Horncastle hesitated for a moment only, and then, drawing a long breath, dashed up the stairs. On the first landing she stumbled over something — the prostrate figure of the nurse. But this saved her, for she found that near the floor she could breathe more freely. Before her appeared to be an open door. She crept along towards it on her hands and knees. The frightened cry of a child, awakened from its sleep in the dark, gave her nerve to rise, enter the room, and dash open the window. By the flashing light she could see a little figure rising from a bed. It was Sta. There was not a moment to be lost, for the open window was beginning to draw the smoke from the passage. Luckily, the boy, by some childish instinct, threw his arms round her neck and left her hands free. Whispering him to hold tight, she clambered out of the window. A narrow ledge of cornice scarcely wide enough for her feet ran along the house to a

distant balcony. With her back to the house she zigzagged her feet along the cornice to get away from the smoke, which now poured directly from the window. Then she grew dizzy; the weight of the child on her bosom seemed to be toppling her forward towards the abyss below. She closed her eyes, frantically grasping the child with crossed arms on her breast as she stood on the ledge, until, as seen from below through the twisting smoke, they might have seemed a figure of the Madonna and Child niched in the wall. Then a voice from above called to her, "Courage!" and she felt the flap of a twisted sheet lowered from an upper window against her face. She grasped it eagerly; it held firmly. Then she heard a cry from below, saw them carrying a ladder, and at last was lifted with her burden from the ledge by powerful hands. Then only did she raise her eyes to the upper window whence had come her help. Smoke and flame were pouring from it. The unknown hero who had sacrificed his only chance of escape to her remained forever unknown.

. . . . . .

Only four miles away that night a group of men were waiting for the dawn in the shadow of a pine near Heavy Tree Bar. As the sky glowed redly over the crest between them and Hymettus, Hamlin said: —

"Another one of those forest fires. It's this side of Black Spur, and a big one, I reckon."

"Do you know," said Barker thoughtfully, "I was thinking of the time the old cabin burnt up on Heavy Tree. It looks to be about in the same place."

"Hush!" said Stacy sharply.

CHAPTER IX

An abandoned tunnel — an irregular orifice in the mountain flank which looked like a dried-up sewer that had disgorged through its opening the refuse of the mountain in red slime, gravel, and a peculiar clay known as "cement," in a foul streak down its side; a narrow ledge on either side, broken up by heaps of quartz, tailings, and rock, and half hidden in scrub, oak, and myrtle; a decaying cabin of logs, bark, and cobblestones, — these made up the exterior of the Marshall claim. To this defacement of the mountain, the rude clearing of thicket and underbrush by fire or blasting, the lopping of tree-boughs and the decapitation of saplings, might be added the débris and ruins of half-civilized occupancy. The ground before the cabin was covered with broken boxes, tin cans, the staves and broken hoops of casks, and the cast-off rags of blankets and clothing. The whole claim in its unsavory, unpicturesque details, and its vulgar story of sordid, reckless, and selfish occupancy and abandonment, was a foul blot on the landscape, which the first rosy dawn only made the more offending. Surely the last spot in the world that men should quarrel and fight for!

So thought George Barker, as with his companions they moved in single file slowly towards it. The little party consisted only of himself, Demorest, and Stacy; Marshall and Hamlin — according to a prearranged plan — were still in ambush, to join them at the first appearance of Steptoe and his gang. The claim was yet unoccupied; they had secured their first success. Steptoe's followers, unaware that his design had been discovered, and confident that

they could easily reach the claim before Marshall and the surveyor, had lingered. Some of them had held a drunken carouse at their rendezvous at Heavy Tree. Others were still engaged in procuring shovels and picks and pans for their mock equipment as miners, and this, again, gave Marshall's adherents the advantage. *They* knew that their opponents would probably first approach the empty claim encumbered only with their peaceful implements, while they themselves had brought their rifles with them.

Stacy, who by tacit consent led the party, on reaching the claim at once posted Demorest and Barker each behind a separate heap of quartz tailings on the ledge, which afforded them a capital breastwork, and stationed himself at the mouth of the tunnel which was nearest the trail. It had already been arranged what each man was to do. They were in possession. For the rest they must wait. What they thought at that moment no one knew. Their characteristic appearance had slightly changed. The melancholy and philosophic Demorest was alert and bitter. Barker's changeful face had become fixed and steadfast. Stacy alone wore his "fighting look," which the others had remembered.

They had not long to wait. The sounds of rude laughter, coarse skylarking, and voices more or less still confused with half-spent liquor came from the rocky trail. And then Steptoe appeared with part of his straggling followers, who were celebrating their easy invasion by clattering their picks and shovels and beating loudly upon their tins and prospecting-pans. The three partners quickly recognized the stamp of the strangers, in spite of their peaceful implements. They were the waifs and strays of San Francisco wharves, of Sacramento dens, of dissolute mountain towns; and there was not, probably, a single actual miner among them. A raging scorn and contempt took possession of Barker and Demorest, but Stacy knew their exact value. As Steptoe

passed before the opening of the tunnel he heard the cry of "Halt!"

He looked up. He saw Stacy not thirty yards before him with his rifle at half-cock. He saw Barker and Demorest, fully armed, rise from behind their breastworks of rock along the ledge and thus fully occupy the claim. But he saw more. He saw that his plot was known. Outlaw and desperado as he was, he saw that he had lost his moral power in this actual possession, and that from that moment he must be the aggressor. He saw he was fighting no irresponsible hirelings like his own, but men of position and importance, whose loss would make a stir. Against their rifles the few revolvers that his men chanced to have slung to them were of little avail. But he was not cowed, although his few followers stumbled together at this momentary check, half angrily, half timorously, like wolves without a leader. "Bring up the other men and their guns," he whispered fiercely to the nearest. Then he faced Stacy.

"Who are *you* to stop peaceful miners going to work on their own claim?" he said coarsely. "I'll tell you *who*, boys," he added, suddenly turning to his men with a hoarse laugh. "It ain't even the bank! It's only Jim Stacy, that the bank kicked out yesterday to save itself, — Jim Stacy and his broken-down pals. And what's the thief doing here — in Marshall's tunnel — the only spot that Marshall can claim? We ain't no particular friends o' Marshall's, though we're neighbors on the same claim; but we ain't going to see Marshall ousted by tramps. Are we, boys?"

"No, by G—d!" said his followers, dropping the pans and seizing their picks and revolvers. They understood the appeal to arms if not to their reason. For an instant the fight seemed imminent. Then a voice from behind them said: —

"You need n't trouble yourselves about that! *I 'm* Marshall! I sent these gentlemen to occupy the claim until I came here with the surveyor," and two men stepped from a thicket of myrtle in the rear of Steptoe and his followers. The speaker, Marshall, was a thin, slight, overworked, overaged man; his companion, the surveyor, was equally slight, but red-bearded, spectacled, and professional-looking, with a long traveling-duster that made him appear even clerical. They were scarcely a physical addition to Stacy's party, whatever might have been their moral and legal support.

But it was just this support that Steptoe strangely clung to in his designs for the future, and a wild idea seized him. The surveyor was really the only disinterested witness between the two parties. If Steptoe could confuse his mind before the actual fighting, — from which he would, of course, escape as a non-combatant, — it would go far afterwards to rehabilitate Steptoe's party. "Very well, then," he said to Marshall, "I shall call this gentleman to witness that we have been attacked here in peaceable possession of our part of the claim by these armed strangers, and whether they are acting on your order or not, their blood will be on your head."

"Then I reckon," said the surveyor, as he tore away his beard, wig, spectacles, and mustache, and revealed the figure of Jack Hamlin, "that I 'm about the last witness that Mr. Steptoe-Horncastle ought to call, and about the last witness that he ever *will* call!"

But he had not calculated upon the desperation of Steptoe over the failure of this last hope. For there sprang up in the outlaw's brain the same hideous idea that he voiced to his companions at the Divide. With a hoarse cry to his followers, he crashed his pickaxe into the brain of Marshall, who stood near him, and sprang forward. Three or four shots were exchanged. Two of his men fell, a bullet from

Stacy's rifle pierced Steptoe's leg, and he dropped forward on one knee. He heard the steps of his reinforcements with their weapons coming close behind him, and rolled aside on the sloping ledge to let them pass. But he rolled too far. He felt himself slipping down the mountain-side in the slimy shoot of the tunnel. He made a desperate attempt to recover himself, but the treacherous drift of the loose débris rolled with him, as if he were part of its refuse, and, carrying him down, left him unconscious, but otherwise uninjured, in the bushes of the second ledge five hundred feet below.

When he recovered his senses the shouts and outcries above him had ceased. He knew he was safe. The ledge could only be reached by a circuitous route three miles away. He knew, too, that if he could only reach a point of outcrop a hundred yards away he could easily descend to the stage road, down the gentle slope of the mountain hidden in a growth of hazel-brush. He bound up his wounded leg, and dragged himself on his hands and knees laboriously to the outcrop. He did not look up; since his pick had crashed into Marshall's brain he had but one blind thought before him — to escape at once! That his revenge and compensation would come later he never doubted. He limped and crept, rolled and fell, from bush to bush through the sloping thickets, until he saw the red road a few feet below him.

If he only had a horse he could put miles between him and any present pursuit! Why should he not have one? The road was frequented by solitary horsemen — miners and Mexicans. He had his revolver with him; what mattered the life of another man if he escaped from the consequences of the one he had just taken? He heard the clatter of hoofs; two priests on mules rode slowly by; he ground his teeth with disappointment. But they had scarcely passed before another and more rapid clatter came

from their rear. It was a lad on horseback. He started. It was his own son!

He remembered in a flash how the boy had said he was coming to meet the padre at the station on that day. His first impulse was to hide himself, his wound, and his defeat from the lad, but the blind idea of escape was still paramount. He leaned over the bank and called to him. The astonished lad cantered eagerly to his side.

"Give me your horse, Eddy," said the father; "I'm in bad luck, and must get."

The boy glanced at his father's face, at his tattered garments and bandaged leg, and read the whole story. It was a familiar page to him. He paled first and then flushed, and then, with an odd glitter in his eyes, said, "Take me with you, father. Do! You always did before. I'll bring you luck."

Desperation is superstitious. Why not take him? They had been lucky before, and the two together might confound any description of their identity to the pursuers. "Help me up, Eddy, and then get up before me."

"*Behind*, you mean," said the boy, with a laugh, as he helped his father into the saddle.

"No," said Steptoe harshly. "*Before* me, — do you hear? And if anything happens *behind* you, don't look! If I drop off, don't stop! Don't get down, but go on and leave me. Do you understand?" he repeated almost savagely.

"Yes," said the boy tremulously.

"All right," said the father, with a softer voice, as he passed one arm round the boy's body and lifted the reins. "Hold tight when we come to the cross-roads, for we'll take the first turn, for old luck's sake, to the Mission."

They were the last words exchanged between them, for as they wheeled rapidly to the left at the cross-roads, Jack Hamlin and Demorest swung as quickly out of another road

to the right immediately behind them. Jack's challenge to "Halt!" was only answered by Steptoe's horse springing forward under the sharp lash of the riata.

"Hold up!" said Jack suddenly, laying his hand upon the rifle which Demorest had lifted to his shoulder. "He 's carrying some one, — a wounded comrade, I reckon. We don't want *him*. Swing out and go for the horse; well forward, in the neck or shoulder."

Demorest swung far out to the right of the road and raised his rifle. As it cracked, Steptoe's horse seemed to have suddenly struck some obstacle ahead of him rather than to have been hit himself, for his head went down with his fore feet under him, and he turned a half-somersault on the road, flinging his two riders a dozen feet away.

Steptoe scrambled to his knees, revolver in hand, but the other figure never moved. "Hands up!" said Jack, sighting his own weapon. The reports seemed simultaneous, but Jack's bullet had pierced Steptoe's brain even before the outlaw's pistol exploded harmlessly in the air.

The two men dismounted, but by a common instinct they both ran to the prostrate figure that had never moved.

"By God! it 's a boy!" said Jack, leaning over the body and lifting the shoulders from which the head hung loosely. "Neck broken and dead as his pal." Suddenly he started, and, to Demorest's astonishment, began hurriedly pulling off the glove from the boy's limp right hand.

"What are you doing?" demanded Demorest in creeping horror.

"Look!" said Jack, as he laid bare the small white hand. The first two fingers were merely unsightly stumps that had been hidden in the padded glove.

"Good God! Van Loo's brother!" said Demorest, recoiling.

"No!" said Jack, with a grim face, "it 's what I have long suspected, — it 's Steptoe's son!"

Steptoe scrambled to his knees, revolver in hand

"His son?" repeated Demorest.

"Yes," said Jack; and he added, after looking at the two bodies with a long-drawn whistle of concern, "and I would n't, if I were you, say anything of this to Barker."

"Why?" said Demorest.

"Well," returned Jack, "when our scrimmage was over down there, and they brought the news to Barker that his wife and her diamonds were burnt up at the hotel, you remember that they said that Mrs. Horncastle had saved his boy."

"Yes," said Demorest; "but what has that to do with it?"

"Nothing, I reckon," said Jack, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, "only Mrs. Horncastle was the mother of the boy that 's lying there."

. . . . . .

Two years later, as Demorest and Stacy sat before the fire in the old cabin on Marshall's claim, — now legally their own, — they looked from the door beyond the great bulk of Black Spur to the pallid snow-line of the Sierras, still as remote and unchanged to them as when they had gazed upon it from Heavy Tree Hill. And, for the matter of that, they themselves seemed to have been left so unchanged that even now, as in the old days, it was Barker's voice as he greeted them from the darkening trail that alone broke their reverie.

"Well," said Demorest cheerfully, "your usual luck, Barker boy!" for they already saw in his face the happy light they had once seen there on an eventful night seven years ago.

"I'm to be married to Mrs. Horncastle next month," he said breathlessly, "and little Sta loves her already as if she was his own mother. Wish me joy."

A slight shadow passed over Stacy's face; but his hand was the first to grasp Barker's, and his voice the first to say "Amen!"

UNCLE JIM AND UNCLE BILLY

THEY were partners. The avuncular title was bestowed on them by Cedar Camp, possibly in recognition of a certain matured good humor, quite distinct from the spasmodic exuberant spirits of its other members, and possibly from what, to its youthful sense, seemed their advanced ages — which must have been at least forty! They had also set habits even in their improvidence, lost incalculable and unpayable sums to each other over euchre regularly every evening, and inspected their sluice-boxes punctually every Saturday for repairs — which they never made. They even got to resemble each other, after the fashion of old married couples, or, rather, as in matrimonial partnerships, were subject to the domination of the stronger character; although in their case it is to be feared that it was the feminine Uncle Billy — enthusiastic, imaginative, and loquacious — who swayed the masculine, steady-going, and practical Uncle Jim. They had lived in the camp since its foundation in 1849; there seemed to be no reason why they should not remain there until its inevitable evolution into a mining town. The younger members might leave through restless ambition or a desire for change or novelty; they were subject to no such trifling mutation. Yet Cedar Camp was surprised one day to hear that Uncle Billy was going away.

The rain was softly falling on the bark thatch of the cabin with a muffled murmur, like a sound heard through sleep. The southwest trades were warm even at that altitude, as the open door testified, although a fire of pine bark was flickering on the adobe hearth and striking out answering fires from the freshly scoured culinary utensils on the

rude sideboard, which Uncle Jim had cleaned that morning with his usual serious persistency. Their best clothes, which were interchangeable and worn alternately by each other on festal occasions, hung on the walls, which were covered with a coarse sailcloth canvas instead of lath-and-plaster, and were diversified by pictures from illustrated papers and stains from the exterior weather. Two "bunks," like ships' berths, — an upper and lower one, — occupied the gable-end of this single apartment, and on beds of coarse sacking, filled with dry moss, were carefully rolled their respective blankets and pillows. They were the only articles not used in common, and whose individuality was respected.

Uncle Jim, who had been sitting before the fire, rose as the square bulk of his partner appeared at the doorway with an armful of wood for the evening stove. By that sign he knew it was nine o'clock: for the last six years Uncle Billy had regularly brought in the wood at that hour, and Uncle Jim had as regularly closed the door after him, and set out their single table, containing a greasy pack of cards taken from its drawer, a bottle of whiskey, and two tin drinking-cups. To this was added a ragged memorandum-book and a stick of pencil. The two men drew their stools to the table.

"Hol' on a minit," said Uncle Billy.

His partner laid down the cards as Uncle Billy extracted from his pocket a pill-box, and, opening it, gravely took a pill. This was clearly an innovation on their regular proceedings, for Uncle Billy was always in perfect health.

"What's this for?" asked Uncle Jim half scornfully.

"Agin ager."

"You ain't got no ager," said Uncle Jim, with the assurance of intimate cognizance of his partner's physical condition.

"But it's a pow'ful preventive! Quinine! Saw this box at Riley's store, and laid out a quarter on it. We kin

keep it here, comfortable, for evenings. It 's mighty soothin' arter a man 's done a hard day's work on the river-bar. Take one."

Uncle Jim gravely took a pill and swallowed it, and handed the box back to his partner.

"We 'll leave it on the table, sociable like, in case any of the boys come in," said Uncle Billy, taking up the cards. "Well. How do we stand?"

Uncle Jim consulted the memorandum-book. "You were owin' me sixty-two thousand dollars on the last game, and the limit 's seventy-five thousand!"

"Je whillikins!" ejaculated Uncle Billy. "Let me see."

He examined the book, feebly attempted to challenge the additions, but with no effect on the total. "We oughter hev made the limit a hundred thousand," he said seriously; "seventy-five thousand is only triflin' in a game like ours. And you 've set down my claim at Angel's?" he continued.

"I allowed you ten thousand dollars for that," said Uncle Jim, with equal gravity, "and it 's a fancy price too."

The claim in question being an unprospected hillside ten miles distant, which Uncle Jim had never seen, and Uncle Billy had not visited for years, the statement was probably true; nevertheless, Uncle Billy retorted: —

"Ye kin never tell how these things will pan out. Why, only this mornin' I was taking a turn round Shot Up Hill, that ye know is just rotten with quartz and gold, and I could n't help thinkin' how much it was like my ole claim at Angel's. I must take a day off to go on there and strike a pick in it, if only for luck."

Suddenly he paused and said, "Strange, ain't it, you should speak of it to-night? Now I call that queer!"

He laid down his cards and gazed mysteriously at his companion. Uncle Jim knew perfectly that Uncle Billy

had regularly once a week for many years declared his final determination to go over to Angel's and prospect his claim, yet nevertheless he half responded to his partner's suggestion of mystery, and a look of fatuous wonder crept into his eyes. But he contented himself by saying cautiously, "You spoke of it first."

"That 's the more sing'lar," said Uncle Billy confidently. "And I 've been thinking about it, and kinder seeing myself thar all day. It 's mighty queer!" He got up and began to rummage among some torn and coverless books in the corner.

"Where 's that 'Dream Book' gone to?"

"The Carson boys borrowed it," replied Uncle Jim. "Anyhow, yours was n't no dream — only a kind o' vision, and the book don't take no stock in visions." Nevertheless, he watched his partner with some sympathy, and added, "That reminds me that I had a dream the other night of being in 'Frisco at a small hotel, with heaps o' money, and all the time being sort o' scared and bewildered over it."

"No?" queried his partner eagerly yet reproachfully. "You never let on anything about it to *me!* It 's mighty queer you havin' these strange feelin's, for I 've had 'em myself. And only to-night, comin' up from the spring, I saw two crows hopping in the trail, and I says, 'If I see another, it 's luck, sure!' And you 'll think I 'm lyin', but when I went to the wood-pile just now there was the *third* one sittin' up on a log as plain as I see you. Tell 'e what, folks ken laugh — but that 's just what Jim Filgee saw the night before he made the big strike!"

They were both smiling, yet with an underlying credulity and seriousness as singularly pathetic as it seemed incongruous to their years and intelligence. Small wonder, however, that in their occupation and environment — living daily in an atmosphere of hope, expectation, and chance, looking forward each morning to the blind stroke of a pick that might bring fortune — they should see signs in nature

and hear mystic voices in the trackless woods that surrounded them. Still less strange that they were peculiarly susceptible to the more recognized diversions of chance, and were gamblers on the turning of a card who trusted to the revelation of a shovelful of upturned earth.

It was quite natural, therefore, that they should return from their abstract form of divination to the table and their cards. But they were scarcely seated before they heard a crackling step in the brush outside, and the free latch of their door was lifted. A younger member of the camp entered. He uttered a peevish "Halloo!" which might have passed for a greeting, or might have been a slight protest at finding the door closed, drew the stool from which Uncle Jim had just risen before the fire, shook his wet clothes like a Newfoundland dog, and sat down. Yet he was by no means churlish nor coarse-looking, and this act was rather one of easy-going, selfish, youthful familiarity than of rudeness. The cabin of Uncles Billy and Jim was considered a public right or "common" of the camp. Conferences between individual miners were appointed there. "I 'll meet you at Uncle Billy's" was a common tryst. Added to this was a tacit claim upon the partners' arbitrative powers, or the equal right to request them to step outside if the interviews were of a private nature. Yet there was never any objection on the part of the partners, and to-night there was not a shadow of resentment of this intrusion in the patient, good-humored, tolerant eyes of Uncles Jim and Billy as they gazed at their guest. Perhaps there was a slight gleam of relief in Uncle Jim's when he found that the guest was unaccompanied by any one, and that it was not a tryst. It would have been unpleasant for the two partners to have stayed out in the rain while their guests were exchanging private confidences in their cabin. While there might have been no limit to their good will, there might have been some to their capacity for exposure.

Uncle Jim drew a huge log from beside the hearth and sat on the driest end of it, while their guest occupied the stool. The young man, without turning away from his discontented, peevish brooding over the fire, vaguely reached backward for the whiskey bottle and Uncle Billy's tin cup, to which he was assisted by the latter's hospitable hand. But on setting down the cup his eye caught sight of the pill-box.

"Wot's that?" he said, with gloomy scorn. "Rat poison?"

"Quinine pills — agin ager," said Uncle Jim. "The newest thing out. Keeps out damp like Injin-rubber! Take one to follow yer whiskey. Me and Uncle Billy would n't think o' settin' down, quiet like, in the evening arter work, without 'em. Take one — ye 'r' welcome! We keep 'em out here for the boys."

Accustomed as the partners were to adopt and wear each other's opinions before folks, as they did each other's clothing, Uncle Billy was, nevertheless, astonished and delighted at Uncle Jim's enthusiasm over *his* pills. The guest took one and swallowed it.

"Mighty bitter!" he said, glancing at his hosts with the quick Californian suspicion of some practical joke. But the honest faces of the partners reassured him.

"That bitterness ye taste," said Uncle Jim quickly, "is whar the thing's gittin' in its work. Sorter sickenin' the malaria — and kinder water-proofin' the insides all to onct and at the same lick! Don't yer see? Put another in yer vest pocket; you 'll be cryin' for 'em like a child afore ye get home. Thar! Well, how 's things agoin' on your claim, Dick? Boomin', eh?"

The guest raised his head and turned it sufficiently to fling his answer back over his shoulder at his hosts. "I don't know what *you 'd* call 'boomin',' " he said gloomily; "I suppose you two men sitting here comfortably by the

fire, without caring whether school keeps or not, would call two feet of backwater over one's claim 'boomin';' I reckon *you'd* consider a hundred and fifty feet of sluicing carried away, and drifting to thunder down the South Fork, something in the way of advertising to your old camp! I suppose *you'd* think it was an inducement to investors! I should n't wonder," he added still more gloomily, as a sudden dash of rain down the wide-throated chimney dropped in his tin cup — "and it would be just like you two chaps, sittin' there gormandizing over your quinine — if yer said this rain that's lasted three weeks was something to be proud of!"

It was the cheerful and the satisfying custom of the rest of the camp, for no reason whatever, to hold Uncle Jim and Uncle Billy responsible for its present location, its vicissitudes, the weather, or any convulsion of nature; and it was equally the partners' habit, for no reason whatever, to accept these animadversions and apologize.

"It's a rain that's soft and mellowin'," said Uncle Billy gently, "and supplin' to the sinews and muscles. Did ye ever notice, Jim," — ostentatiously to his partner, — "did ye ever notice that you get inter a kind o' sweaty lather workin' in it? Sorter openin' to the pores!"

"Fetches 'em every time," said Uncle Jim. "Better nor fancy soap."

Their guest laughed bitterly. "Well, I'm going to leave it to you. I reckon to cut the whole concern to-morrow, and 'lite' out for something new. It can't be worse than this."

The two partners looked grieved, albeit they were accustomed to these outbursts. Everybody who thought of going away from Cedar Camp used it first as a threat to these patient men, after the fashion of runaway nephews, or made an exemplary scene of their going.

"Better think twice afore ye go," said Uncle Billy.

"I 've seen worse weather afore ye came," said Uncle Jim slowly. "Water all over the Bar; the mud so deep ye could n't get to Angel's for a sack o' flour, and we had to grub on pine nuts and jackass-rabbits. And yet — we stuck by the camp, and here we are!"

The mild answer apparently goaded their guest to fury. He rose from his seat, threw back his long, dripping hair from his handsome but querulous face, and scattered a few drops on the partners. "Yes, that 's just it. That 's what gets me! Here you stick, and here you are! And here you 'll stick and rust until you starve or drown! Here you are, — two men who ought to be out in the world, playing your part as grown men, — stuck here like children 'playing house' in the woods; playing work in your wretched mud-pie ditches, and content. Two men not so old that you might n't be taking your part in the fun of the world, going to balls or theatres, or paying attention to girls, and yet old enough to have married and have your families around you, content to stay in this God-forsaken place; old bachelors, pigging together like poor-house paupers. That 's what gets me! Say you *like* it? Say you expect by hanging on to make a strike — and what does that amount to? What are *your* chances? How many of us have made, or are making, more than grub wages? Say you 're willing to share and share alike as you do — have you got enough for two? Are n't you actually living off each other? Are n't you grinding each other down, choking each other's struggles, as you sink together deeper and deeper in the mud of this cussed camp? And while you 're doing this, are n't you, by your age and position here, holding out hopes to others that you know cannot be fulfilled?"

Accustomed as they were to the half-querulous, half-humorous, but always extravagant, criticism of the others, there was something so new in this arraignment of themselves

that the partners for a moment sat silent. There was a slight flush on Uncle Billy's cheek, there was a slight paleness on Uncle Jim's. He was the first to reply. But he did so with a certain dignity which neither his partner nor their guest had ever seen on his face before.

"As it 's *our* fire that 's warmed ye up like this, Dick Bullen," he said, slowly rising, with his hand resting on Uncle Billy's shoulder, "and as it 's *our* whiskey that 's loosened your tongue, I reckon we must put up with what ye 'r' saying, just as we 've managed to put up with our own way o' living, and not quo'll with ye under our own roof."

The young fellow saw the change in Uncle Jim's face and quickly extended his hand, with an apologetic backward shake of his long hair. "Hang it all, old man," he said, with a laugh of mingled contrition and amusement, "you must n't mind what I said just now. I 've been so worried thinking of things about *myself*, and, maybe, a little about you, that I quite forgot I had n't a call to preach to anybody — least of all to you. So we part friends, Uncle Jim, and you too, Uncle Billy, and you 'll forget what I said. In fact, I don't know why I spoke at all — only I was passing your claim just now, and wondering how much longer your old sluice-boxes would hold out, and where in thunder you 'd get others when they caved in! I reckon that sent me off. That 's all, old chap!"

Uncle Billy's face broke into a beaming smile of relief, and it was *his* hand that first grasped his guest's; Uncle Jim quickly followed with as honest a pressure, but with eyes that did not seem to be looking at Bullen, though all trace of resentment had died out of them. He walked to the door with him, again shook hands, but remained looking out in the darkness some time after Dick Bullen's tangled hair and broad shoulders had disappeared.

Meantime, Uncle Billy had resumed his seat, and was chuckling and reminiscent as he cleaned out his pipe.

"Kinder reminds me of Jo Sharp, when he was cleaned out at poker by his own partners in his own cabin, comin' up here and bedevilin' *us* about it! What was it you lint him?"

But Uncle Jim did not reply; and Uncle Billy, taking up the cards, began to shuffle them, smiling vaguely, yet at the same time somewhat painfully. "Arter all, Dick was mighty cut up about what he said, and I felt kinder sorry for him. And, you know, I rather cotton to a man that speaks his mind. Sorter clears him out, you know, of all the slumgullion that 's in him. It 's just like washin' out a pan o' prospecting: you pour in the water, and keep slushing it round and round, and out comes first the mud and dirt, and then the gravel, and then the black sand, and then — it 's all out, and there 's a speck o' gold glistenin' at the bottom!"

"Then you think there *was* suthin' in what he said?" said Uncle Jim, facing about slowly.

An odd tone in his voice made Uncle Billy look up. "No," he said quickly, shying with the instinct of an easy, pleasure-loving nature from a possible grave situation. "No, I don't think he ever got the color! But wot are ye moonin' about for? Ain't ye goin' to play? It 's mor' 'n half past nine now."

Thus adjured, Uncle Jim moved up to the table and sat down, while Uncle Billy dealt the cards, turning up the Jack or right bower — but *without* that exclamation of delight which always accompanied his good fortune, nor did Uncle Jim respond with the usual corresponding simulation of deep disgust. Such a circumstance had not occurred before in the history of their partnership. They both played in silence, — a silence only interrupted by a larger splash of raindrops down the chimney.

"We orter put a couple of stones on the chimney-top, edgewise, like Jack Curtis does. It keeps out the rain

without interferin' with the draft," said Uncle Billy musingly.

"What's the use if" —

"If what?" said Uncle Billy quietly.

"If we don't make it broader," said Uncle Jim half wearily.

They both stared at the chimney, but Uncle Jim's eye followed the wall around to the bunks. There were many discolorations on the canvas, and a picture of the Goddess of Liberty from an illustrated paper had broken out in a kind of damp, measly eruption. "I 'll stick that funny handbill of the 'Washin' Soda' I got at the grocery store the other day right over the Liberty gal. It's a mighty perty woman washin' with short sleeves," said Uncle Billy. "That's the comfort of them picters, you kin always get somethin' new, and it adds thickness to the wall."

Uncle Jim went back to the cards in silence. After a moment he rose again, and hung his overcoat against the door.

"Wind's comin' in," he said briefly.

"Yes," said Uncle Billy cheerfully, "but it would n't seem nat'ral if there was n't that crack in the door to let the sunlight in o' mornin's. Makes a kind o' sundial, you know. When the streak o' light's in that corner, I say 'six o'clock!' when it 's across the chimney I say 'seven!' and so 't is!"

It certainly had grown chilly, and the wind was rising. The candle guttered and flickered; the embers on the hearth brightened occasionally, as if trying to dispel the gathering shadows, but always ineffectually. The game was frequently interrupted by the necessity of stirring the fire. After an interval of gloom, in which each partner successively drew the candle to his side to examine his cards, Uncle Jim said: —

"Say?"

"Well!" responded Uncle Billy.

"Are you sure you saw that third crow on the woodpile?"

"Sure as I see you now — and a darned sight plainer. Why?"

"Nothin', I was just thinkin'. Look here! How do we stand now?"

Uncle Billy was still losing. "Nevertheless," he said cheerfully, "I 'm owin' you a matter of sixty thousand dollars."

Uncle Jim examined the book abstractedly. "Suppose," he said slowly, but without looking at his partner, — "suppose, as it 's gettin' late now, we play for my half share of the claim agin the limit — seventy thousand — to square up."

"Your half share!" repeated Uncle Billy, with amused incredulity.

"My half share of the claim, — of this yer house, you know, — one half of all that Dick Bullen calls our rotten starvation property," reiterated Uncle Jim, with a half smile.

Uncle Billy laughed. It was a novel idea; it was, of course, "all in the air," like the rest of their game, yet even then he had an odd feeling that he would have liked Dick Bullen to have known it. "Wade in, old pard," he said. "I 'm on it."

Uncle Jim lit another candle to reinforce the fading light, and the deal fell to Uncle Billy. He turned up Jack of clubs. He also turned a little redder as he took up his cards, looked at them, and glanced hastily at his partner. "It 's no use playing," he said. "Look here!" He laid down his cards on the table. They were the ace, king and queen of clubs, and Jack of spades, — or left bower, — which, with the turned-up Jack of clubs, — or right bower, — comprised *all* the winning cards!

"By jingo! If we'd been playin' four-handed, say you an' me agin some other ducks, we'd have made 'four' in that deal, and h'isted some money — eh?" and his eyes sparkled. Uncle Jim, also, had a slight tremulous light in his own.

"Oh, no! I did n't see no three crows this afternoon," added Uncle Billy gleefully, as his partner, in turn, began to shuffle the cards with laborious and conscientious exactitude. Then dealing, he turned up a heart for trumps.

Uncle Billy took up his cards one by one, but when he had finished his face had become as pale as it had been red before. "What's the matter?" said Uncle Jim quickly, his own face growing white.

Uncle Billy slowly and with breathless awe laid down his cards, face up on the table. It was exactly the same sequence *in hearts*, with the knave of diamonds added. He could again take every trick.

They stared at each other with vacant faces and a half-drawn smile of fear. They could hear the wind moaning in the trees beyond; there was a sudden rattling at the door. Uncle Billy started to his feet, but Uncle Jim caught his arm. "*Don't leave the cards!* It's only the wind; sit down," he said, in a low, awe-hushed voice, "it's your deal; you were two before, and two now, that makes your four; you've only one point to make to win the game. Go on."

They both poured out a cup of whiskey, smiling vaguely, yet with a certain terror in their eyes. Their hands were cold; the cards slipped from Uncle Billy's benumbed fingers; when he had shuffled them he passed them to his partner to shuffle them also, but did not speak. When Uncle Jim had shuffled them methodically he handed them back fatefully to his partner. Uncle Billy dealt them with a trembling hand. He turned up a club. "If you are sure of these tricks, you know you've won," said Uncle Jim

in a voice that was scarcely audible. Uncle Billy did not reply, but tremulously laid down the ace and right and left bowers.

He had won!

A feeling of relief came over each, and they laughed hysterically and discordantly. Ridiculous and childish as their contest might have seemed to a looker-on, to each the tension had been as great as that of the greatest gambler, without the gambler's trained restraint, coolness, and composure. Uncle Billy nervously took up the cards again.

"Don't," said Uncle Jim gravely; "it 's no use — the luck 's gone now."

"Just one more deal," pleaded his partner.

Uncle Jim looked at the fire, Uncle Billy hastily dealt, and threw the two hands face up on the table. They were the ordinary average cards. He dealt again, with the same result. "I told you so," said Uncle Jim, without looking up.

It certainly seemed a tame performance after their wonderful hands, and after another trial Uncle Billy threw the cards aside and drew his stool before the fire. "Mighty queer, warn't it?" he said, with reminiscent awe. "Three times running. Do you know, I felt a kind o' creepy feelin' down my back all the time. Criky! what luck! None of the boys would believe it if we told 'em — least of all that Dick Bullen, who don't believe in luck, anyway. Wonder what he 'd have said! and, Lord! how he 'd have looked! Wall! what are you starin' so for?"

Uncle Jim had faced around, and was gazing at Uncle Billy's good-humored, simple face. "Nothin'!" he said briefly, and his eyes again sought the fire.

"Then don't look as if you was seein' suthin' — you give me the creeps," returned Uncle Billy a little petulantly. "Let 's turn in, afore the fire goes out!"

The fateful cards were put back into the drawer, the

table shoved against the wall. The operation of undressing was quickly got over, the clothes they wore being put on top of their blankets. Uncle Billy yawned, "I wonder what kind of a dream I 'll have to-night — it oughter be suthin' to explain that luck." This was his "good-night" to his partner. In a few moments he was sound asleep.

Not so Uncle Jim. He heard the wind gradually go down, and in the oppressive silence that followed could detect the deep breathing of his companion and the far-off yelp of a coyote. His eyesight becoming accustomed to the semi-darkness, broken only by the scintillation of the dying embers of their fire, he could take in every detail of their sordid cabin and the rude environment in which they had lived so long. The dismal patches on the bark roof, the wretched makeshifts of each day, the dreary prolongation of discomfort, were all plain to him now, without the sanguine hope that had made them bearable. And when he shut his eyes upon them, it was only to travel in fancy down the steep mountain-side that he had trodden so often to the dreary claim on the overflowed river, to the heaps of "tailings" that encumbered it, like empty shells of the hollow, profitless days spent there, which they were always waiting for the stroke of good fortune to clear away. He saw again the rotten "sluicing," through whose hopeless rifts and holes even their scant daily earnings had become scantier. At last he arose, and with infinite gentleness let himself down from his berth without disturbing his sleeping partner, and wrapping himself in his blanket, went to the door, which he noiselessly opened. From the position of a few stars that were glittering in the northern sky he knew that it was yet scarcely midnight; there were still long, restless hours before the day! In the feverish state into which he had gradually worked himself it seemed to him impossible to wait the coming of the dawn.

But he was mistaken. For even as he stood there all

nature seemed to invade his humble cabin with its free and fragrant breath, and invest him with its great companionship. He felt again, in that breath, that strange sense of freedom, that mystic touch of partnership with the birds and beasts, the shrubs and trees, in this greater home before him. It was this vague communion that had kept him there, that still held these world-sick, weary workers in their rude cabins on the slopes around him; and he felt upon his brow that balm that had nightly lulled him and them to sleep and forgetfulness. He closed the door, turned away, crept as noiselessly as before into his bunk again, and presently fell into a profound slumber.

But when Uncle Billy awoke the next morning he saw it was late; for the sun, piercing the crack of the closed door, was sending a pencil of light across the cold hearth, like a match to rekindle its dead embers. His first thought was of his strange luck the night before, and of disappointment that he had not had the dream of divination that he had looked for. He sprang to the floor, but as he stood upright his glance fell on Uncle Jim's bunk. It was empty. Not only that, but his *blankets* — Uncle Jim's own particular blankets — *were gone!*

A sudden revelation of his partner's manner the night before struck him now with the cruelty of a blow; a sudden intelligence, perhaps the very divination he had sought, flashed upon him like lightning! He glanced wildly around the cabin. The table was drawn out from the wall a little ostentatiously, as if to catch his eye. On it was lying the stained chamois-skin purse in which they had kept the few grains of gold remaining from their last week's "clean up." The grains had been carefully divided, and half had been taken! But near it lay the little memorandum-book, open, with the stick of pencil lying across it. A deep line was drawn across the page on which was recorded their imaginary extravagant gains and losses, even to the entry of

Uncle Jim's half share of the claim which he had risked and lost! Underneath were hurriedly scrawled the words: —

"Settled by *your* luck, last night, old pard. — JAMES FOSTER."

It was nearly a month before Cedar Camp was convinced that Uncle Billy and Uncle Jim had dissolved partnership. Pride had prevented Uncle Billy from revealing his suspicions of the truth, or of relating the events that preceded Uncle Jim's clandestine flight, and Dick Bullen had gone to Sacramento by stagecoach the same morning. He briefly gave out that his partner had been called to San Francisco on important business of their own, that indeed might necessitate his own removal there later. In this he was singularly assisted by a letter from the absent Jim, dated at San Francisco, begging him not to be anxious about his success, as he had hopes of presently entering into a profitable business, but with no further allusions to his precipitate departure, nor any suggestion of a reason for it. For two or three days Uncle Billy was staggered and bewildered; in his profound simplicity he wondered if his extraordinary good fortune that night had made him deaf to some explanation of his partner's, or, more terrible, if he had shown some "low" and incredible intimation of taking his partner's extravagant bet as *real* and binding. In this distress he wrote to Uncle Jim an appealing and apologetic letter, albeit somewhat incoherent and inaccurate, and bristling with misspelling, camp slang, and old partnership jibes. But to this elaborate epistle he received only Uncle Jim's repeated assurances of his own bright prospects, and his hopes that his old partner would be more fortunate, single-handed, on the old claim. For a whole week or two Uncle Billy sulked, but his invincible optimism and good humor got the better of him, and he thought only of his old partner's good fortune. He wrote him

regularly, but always to one address — a box at the San Francisco post-office, which to the simple-minded Uncle Billy suggested a certain official importance. To these letters Uncle Jim responded regularly but briefly.

From a certain intuitive pride in his partner and his affection, Uncle Billy did not show these letters openly to the camp, although he spoke freely of his former partner's promising future, and even read them short extracts. It is needless to say that the camp did not accept Uncle Billy's story with unsuspecting confidence. On the contrary, a hundred surmises, humorous or serious, but always extravagant, were afloat in Cedar Camp. The partners had quarreled over their clothes — Uncle Jim, who was taller than Uncle Billy, had refused to wear his partner's trousers. They had quarreled over cards — Uncle Jim had discovered that Uncle Billy was in possession of a "cold deck," or marked pack. They had quarreled over Uncle Billy's carelessness in grinding up half a box of "bilious pills" in the morning's coffee. A gloomily imaginative mule-driver had darkly suggested that, as no one had really seen Uncle Jim leave the camp, he was still there, and his bones would yet be found in one of the ditches; while a still more credulous miner averred that what he had thought was the cry of a screech-owl the night previous to Uncle Jim's disappearance, might have been the agonized utterance of that murdered man. It was highly characteristic of that camp — and, indeed, of others in California — that nobody, not even the ingenious theorists themselves, believed their story, and that no one took the slightest pains to verify or disprove it. Unhappily, Uncle Billy never knew it, and moved all unconsciously in this atmosphere of burlesque suspicion. And then a singular change took place in the attitude of the camp towards him and the disrupted partnership. Hitherto, for no reason whatever, all had agreed to put the blame upon Billy — possibly because

he was present to receive it. As days passed that slight reticence and dejection in his manner, which they had at first attributed to remorse and a guilty conscience, now began to tell as absurdly in his favor. Here was poor Uncle Billy toiling through the ditches, while his selfish partner was lolling in the lap of luxury in San Francisco! Uncle Billy's glowing accounts of Uncle Jim's success only contributed to the sympathy now fully given in his behalf and their execration of the absconding partner. It was proposed at Biggs's store that a letter expressing the indignation of the camp over his heartless conduct to his late partner, William Fall, should be forwarded to him. Condolences were offered to Uncle Billy, and uncouth attempts were made to cheer his loneliness. A procession of half a dozen men twice a week to his cabin, carrying their own whiskey and winding up with a "stag dance" before the premises, was sufficient to lighten his eclipsed gayety and remind him of a happier past. "Surprise" working parties visited his claim with spasmodic essays towards helping him, and great good humor and hilarity prevailed. It was not an unusual thing for an honest miner to arise from an idle gathering in some cabin and excuse himself with the remark that he "reckoned he 'd put in an hour's work in Uncle Billy's tailings!" And yet, as before, it was very improbable if any of these reckless benefactors *really* believed in their own earnestness or in the gravity of the situation. Indeed, a kind of hopeful cynicism ran through their performances. "Like as not, Uncle Billy is still in 'cahoots' [*i. e.*, shares] with his old pard, and is just laughin' at us as he 's sendin' him accounts of our tomfoolin'."

And so the winter passed and the rains, and the days of cloudless skies and chill starlit nights began. There were still freshets from the snow reservoirs piled high in the Sierran passes, and the Bar was flooded, but that passed

too, and only the sunshine remained. Monotonous as the seasons were, there was a faint movement in the camp with the stirring of the sap in the pines and cedars. And then, one day, there was a strange excitement on the Bar. Men were seen running hither and thither, but mainly gathering in a crowd on Uncle Billy's claim, that still retained the old partners' names in "The Fall and Foster." To add to the excitement, there was the quickly repeated report of a revolver, to all appearance aimlessly exploded in the air by some one on the outskirts of the assemblage. As the crowd opened, Uncle Billy appeared, pale, hysterical, breathless, and staggering a little under the back-slapping and hand-shaking of the whole camp. For Uncle Billy had "struck it rich" — had just discovered a "pocket," roughly estimated to be worth fifteen thousand dollars!

Although in that supreme moment he missed the face of his old partner, he could not help seeing the unaffected delight and happiness shining in the eyes of all who surrounded him. It was characteristic of that sanguine but uncertain life that success and good fortune brought no jealousy nor envy to the unfortunate, but was rather a promise and prophecy of the fulfillment of their own hopes. The gold was there — Nature but yielded up her secret. There was no prescribed limit to her bounty. So strong was this conviction that a long-suffering but still hopeful miner, in the enthusiasm of the moment, stooped down and patted a large boulder with the apostrophic "Good old gal!"

Then followed a night of jubilee, a next morning of hurried consultation with a mining expert and speculator lured to the camp by the good tidings; and then the very next night — to the utter astonishment of Cedar Camp — Uncle Billy, with a draft for twenty thousand dollars in his pocket, started for San Francisco, and took leave of his claim and the camp forever!

. . . . . .

When Uncle Billy landed at the wharves of San Francisco he was a little bewildered. The Golden Gate beyond was obliterated by the incoming sea-fog, which had also roofed in the whole city, and lights already glittered along the gray streets that climbed the grayer sand-hills. As a Western man, brought up by inland rivers, he was fascinated and thrilled by the tall-masted sea-going ships, and he felt a strange sense of the remoter mysterious ocean, which he had never seen. But he was impressed and startled by smartly dressed men and women, the passing of carriages, and a sudden conviction that he was strange and foreign to what he saw. It had been his cherished intention to call upon his old partner in his working clothes, and then clap down on the table before him a draft for ten thousand dollars as *his* share of their old claim. But in the face of these brilliant strangers a sudden and unexpected timidity came upon him. He had heard of a cheap popular hotel, much frequented by the returning gold-miner, who entered its hospitable doors — which held an easy access to shops — and emerged in a few hours a gorgeous butterfly of fashion, leaving his old chrysalis behind him. Thence he inquired his way; hence he afterwards issued in garments glaringly new and ill fitting. But he had not sacrificed his beard, and there was still something fine and original in his handsome weak face that overcame the cheap convention of his clothes. Making his way to the post-office, he was again discomfited by the great size of the building, and bewildered by the array of little square letter-boxes behind glass which occupied one whole wall, and an equal number of opaque and locked wooden ones legibly numbered. His heart leaped; he remembered the number, and before him was a window with a clerk behind it. Uncle Billy leaned forward.

"Kin you tell me if the man that box 690 b'longs to is in?"

The clerk stared, made him repeat the question, and then turned away. But he returned almost instantly, with two or three grinning heads besides his own, apparently set behind his shoulders. Uncle Billy was again asked to repeat his question. He did so.

"Why don't you go and see if 690 is in his box?" said the first clerk, turning with affected asperity to one of the others.

The clerk went away, returned, and said with singular gravity, "He was there a moment ago, but he's gone out to stretch his legs. It's rather crampin' at first; and he can't stand it more than ten hours at a time, you know."

But simplicity has its limits. Uncle Billy had already guessed his real error in believing his partner was officially connected with the building; his cheek had flushed and then paled again. The pupils of his blue eyes had contracted into suggestive black points. "Ef you 'll let me in at that winder, young fellers," he said, with equal gravity, "I 'll show yer how I kin make *you* small enough to go in a box without crampin'! But I only wanted to know where Jim Foster *lived.*"

At which the first clerk became perfunctory again, but civil. "A letter left in his box would get you that information," he said, "and here's paper and pencil to write it now."

Uncle Billy took the paper and began to write, "Just got here. Come and see me at" — He paused. A brilliant idea had struck him; he could impress both his old partner and the upstarts at the window; he would put in the name of the latest "swell" hotel in San Francisco, said to be a fairy dream of opulence. He added "the Oriental," and without folding the paper shoved it in the window.

"Don't you want an envelope?" asked the clerk.

"Put a stamp on the corner of it," responded Uncle Billy, laying down a coin, "and she 'll go through." The

clerk smiled, but affixed the stamp, and Uncle Billy turned away.

But it was a short-lived triumph. The disappointment at finding Uncle Jim's address conveyed no idea of his habitation seemed to remove him farther away, and lose his identity in the great city. Besides, he must now make good his own address, and seek rooms at the Oriental. He went thither. The furniture and decorations, even in these early days of hotel-building in San Francisco, were extravagant and overstrained, and Uncle Billy felt lost and lonely in his strange surroundings. But he took a handsome suite of rooms, unhesitatingly paid for them in advance, and then, half frightened, walked out of them to ramble vaguely through the city in the feverish hope of meeting his old partner. At night his inquietude increased; he could not face the long row of tables in the pillared dining-room, filled with smartly dressed men and women; he evaded his bedroom, with its brocaded satin chairs and its gilt bedstead, and fled to his modest lodgings at the Good Cheer House, and appeased his hunger at its cheap restaurant, in the company of retired miners and freshly arrived Eastern emigrants. Two or three days passed thus in this quaint double existence. Three or four times a day he would enter the gorgeous Oriental with affected ease and carelessness, demand his key from the hotel-clerk, ask for the letter that did not come, go to his room, gaze vaguely from his window on the passing crowd below for the partner he could not find, and then return to the Good Cheer House for rest and sustenance. On the fourth day he received a short note from Uncle Jim; it was couched in his usual sanguine but brief and business-like style. He was very sorry, but important and profitable business took him out of town, but he trusted to return soon and welcome his old partner. He was also, for the first time, jocose, and hoped that Uncle Billy would not "see all the sights" before

he, Uncle Jim, returned. Disappointing as this procrastination was to Uncle Billy, a gleam of hope irradiated it: the letter had bridged over that gulf which seemed to yawn between them at the post-office. His old partner had accepted his visit to San Francisco without question, and had alluded to a renewal of their old intimacy. For Uncle Billy, with all his trustful simplicity, had been tortured by two harrowing doubts: one, whether Uncle Jim in his new-fledged smartness as a "city" man — such as he saw in the streets — would care for his rough companionship; the other, whether he, Uncle Billy, ought not to tell him at once of his changed fortune. But, like all weak, unreasoning men, he clung desperately to a detail — he could not forego his old idea of astounding Uncle Jim by giving him his share of the "strike" as his first intimation of it, and he doubted, with more reason, perhaps, if Jim would see him after he had heard of his good fortune. For Uncle Billy had still a frightened recollection of Uncle Jim's sudden stroke for independence, and that rigid punctiliousness which had made him doggedly accept the responsibility of his extravagant stake at euchre.

With a view of educating himself for Uncle Jim's company, he "saw the sights" of San Francisco — as an overgrown and somewhat stupid child might have seen them — with great curiosity, but little contamination or corruption. But I think he was chiefly pleased with watching the arrival of the Sacramento and Stockton steamers at the wharves, in the hope of discovering his old partner among the passengers on the gang-plank. Here, with his old superstitious tendency and gambler's instinct, he would augur great success in his search that day if any one of the passengers bore the least resemblance to Uncle Jim, if a man or woman stepped off first, or if he met a single person's questioning eye. Indeed, this got to be the real occupation of the day, which he would on no account have omitted, and to a certain

event arrived each day in his mind the morning's work of their out partnership. He would say to himself, "It's time to go and look up Jim," and put off what he was pleased to think were his pleasures until this act of duty was accomplished.

In this singleness of purpose he made very few and no entangling acquaintances, nor did he impart to any one the secret of his fortune, loyally reserving it for his partner's first knowledge. To a man of his natural frankness and simplicity this was a great trial, and was, perhaps, a crucial test of his devotion. When he gave up his rooms at the Oriental — as not necessary after his partner's absence — he sent a letter, with his humble address, to the mysterious lock-box of his partner without fear or false shame. He would explain it all when they met. But he sometimes treated unlucky and returning miners to a dinner and a visit to the gallery of some theatre. Yet while he had an active sympathy with and understanding of the humblest, Uncle Billy, who for many years had done his own and his partner's washing, scrubbing, mending, and cooking, and saw no degradation in it, was somewhat inconsistently irritated by menial functions in men, and although he gave extravagantly to waiters, and threw a dollar to the crossing sweeper, there was always a certain shy avoidance of them in his manner. Coming from the theatre one night Uncle Billy was, however, seriously concerned by one of these crossing-sweepers turning hastily before them and being knocked down by a passing carriage. The man rose and limped hurriedly away; but Uncle Billy was amazed and still more irritated to hear from his companion that this kind of menial occupation was often profitable, and that at some of the principal crossings the sweepers were already rich men.

But a few days later brought a more notable event to Uncle Billy. One afternoon in Montgomery Street he

recognized in one of its smartly dressed frequenters a man who had a few years before been a member of Cedar Camp. Uncle Billy's childish delight at this meeting, which seemed to bridge over his old partner's absence, was, however, only half responded to by the ex-miner, and then somewhat satirically. In the fullness of his emotion, Uncle Billy confided to him that he was seeking his old partner, Jim Foster, and, reticent of his own good fortune, spoke glowingly of his partner's brilliant expectations, but deplored his inability to find him. And just now he was away on important business. "I reckon he 's got back," said the man dryly. "I did n't know he had a lock-box at the post-office, but I can give you his other address. He lives at the Presidio, at Washerwoman's Bay." He stopped and looked with a satirical smile at Uncle Billy. But the latter, familiar with California mining-camp nomenclature, saw nothing strange in it, and merely repeated his companion's words.

"You 'll find him there! Good-by! So long! Sorry I 'm in a hurry," said the ex-miner, and hurried away.

Uncle Billy was too delighted with the prospect of a speedy meeting with Uncle Jim to resent his former associate's supercilious haste, or even to wonder why Uncle Jim had not informed him that he had returned. It was not the first time that he had felt how wide was the gulf between himself and these others, and the thought drew him closer to his old partner, as well as his old idea, as it was now possible to surprise him with the draft. But as he was going to surprise him in his own boarding-house — probably a handsome one — Uncle Billy reflected that he would do so in a certain style.

He accordingly went to a livery stable and ordered a landau and pair, with a negro coachman. Seated in it, in his best and most ill-fitting clothes, he asked the coachman to take him to the Presidio, and leaned back in the cushions

as they drove through the streets with such an expression of beaming gratification on his good-humored face that the passers-by smiled at the equipage and its extravagant occupant. To them it seemed the not unusual sight of the successful miner "on a spree." To the unsophisticated Uncle Billy their smiling seemed only a natural and kindly recognition of his happiness, and he nodded and smiled back to them with unsuspecting candor and innocent playfulness. "These yer 'Frisco fellers ain't *all* slouches, you bet," he added to himself half aloud, at the back of the grinning coachman.

Their way led through well-built streets to the outskirts, or rather to that portion of the city which seemed to have been overwhelmed by shifting sand-dunes, from which half-submerged fences and even low houses barely marked the line of highway. The resistless trade-winds which had marked this change blew keenly in his face and slightly chilled his ardor. At a turn in the road the sea came in sight, and sloping towards it the great Cemetery of Lone Mountain, with white shafts and marbles that glittered in the sunlight like the sails of ships waiting to be launched down that slope into the Eternal Ocean. Uncle Billy shuddered. What if it had been his fate to seek Uncle Jim there!

"Dar's yar Presidio!" said the negro coachman a few moments later, pointing with his whip, "and dar's yar Wash'woman's Bay!"

Uncle Billy stared. A huge quadrangular fort of stone with a flag flying above its battlements stood at a little distance, pressed against the rocks, as if beating back the encroaching surges; between him and the fort but farther inland was a lagoon with a number of dilapidated, rudely patched cabins or cottages, like stranded driftwood around its shore. But there was no mansion, no block of houses, no street, not another habitation or dwelling to be seen!

Uncle Billy's first shock of astonishment was succeeded by a feeling of relief. He had secretly dreaded a meeting with his old partner in the "haunts of fashion;" whatever was the cause that made Uncle Jim seek this obscure retirement affected him but slightly; he even was thrilled with a vague memory of the old shiftless camp they had both abandoned. A certain instinct — he knew not why, or less still that it might be one of delicacy — made him alight before they reached the first house. Bidding the carriage wait, Uncle Billy entered, and was informed by a blowzy Irish laundress at a tub that Jim Foster, or "Arkansaw Jim," lived at the fourth shanty "beyant." He was at home, for "he'd shprained his fut." Uncle Billy hurried on, stopped before the door of a shanty scarcely less rude than their old cabin, and half timidly pushed it open. A growling voice from within, a figure that rose hurriedly, leaning on a stick, with an attempt to fly, but in the same moment sank back in a chair with an hysterical laugh — and Uncle Billy stood in the presence of his old partner! But as Uncle Billy darted forward, Uncle Jim rose again, and this time with outstretched hands. Uncle Billy caught them, and in one supreme pressure seemed to pour out and transfuse his whole simple soul into his partner's. There they swayed each other backwards and forwards and sideways by their still clasped hands, until Uncle Billy, with a glance at Uncle Jim's bandaged ankle, shoved him by sheer force down into his chair.

Uncle Jim was the first to speak. "Caught, b' gosh! I mighter known you 'd be as big a fool as me! Look you, Billy Fall, do you know what you 've done? You 've druv me out er the streets whar I was makin' an honest livin', by day, on three crossin's! Yes," he laughed forgivingly, "you druv me out er it, by day, jest because I reckoned that some time I might run into your darned fool face," — another laugh and a grasp of the hand, — "and then,

b' gosh! not content with ruinin' my business *by day*, when I took to it at night, you took to goin' out at nights too, and so put a stopper on me there! Shall I tell you what else you did? Well, by the holy poker! I owe this sprained foot to your darned foolishness and my own, for it was getting away from you one night after the theatre that I got run into and run over!

"Ye see," he went on, unconscious of Uncle Billy's paling face, and with a naïveté, though perhaps not a delicacy, equal to Uncle Billy's own, "I had to play roots on you with that lock-box business and these letters, because I did n't want you to know what I was up to, for you might n't like it, and might think it was lowerin' to the old firm, don't yer see? I would n't hev gone into it, but I was played out, and I don't mind tellin' you *now*, old man, that when I wrote you that first chipper letter from the lock-box I hed n't eat anythin' for two days. But it 's all right *now*," with a laugh. "Then I got into this business — thinkin' it nothin' — jest the very last thing — and do you know, old pard, I could n't tell anybody but *you* — and, in fact, I kept it jest to tell you — I 've made nine hundred and fifty-six dollars! Yes, sir, *nine hundred and fifty-six dollars!* solid money, in Adams and Co.'s Bank, just out er my trade."

"Wot trade?" asked Uncle Billy.

Uncle Jim pointed to the corner, where stood a large, heavy, crossing-sweeper's broom. "That trade."

"Certingly," said Uncle Billy, with a quick laugh.

"It's an outdoor trade," said Uncle Jim gravely, but with no suggestion of awkwardness or apology in his manner; "and thar ain't much difference between sweepin' a crossin' with a broom and rakin' over tailin' with a rake, *only — wot ye get* with a broom, *you have handed to ye*, and ye don't have to *pick it up and fish it out er* the wet rocks and sluice-gushin'; and it 's a heap less tirin' to the back."

"Certingly, you bet!" said Uncle Billy enthusiastically, yet with a certain nervous abstraction.

"I'm glad ye say so; for yer see I did n't know at first how you 'd tumble to my doing it, until I 'd made my pile. And ef I had n't made it, I would n't hev set eyes on ye agin, old pard — never!"

"Do you mind my runnin' out a minit," said Uncle Billy, rising. "You see, I've got a friend waitin' for me outside — and I reckon" — he stammered — "I'll jest run out and send him off, so I kin talk comf'ble to ye."

"Ye ain't got anybody you 're owin' money to," said Uncle Jim earnestly, "anybody follerin' you to get paid, eh? For I kin jest set down right here and write ye off a check on the bank!"

"No," said Uncle Billy. He slipped out of the door, and ran like a deer to the waiting carriage. Thrusting a twenty-dollar gold-piece into the coachman's hand, he said hoarsely, "I ain't wantin' that kerridge just now; ye ken drive around and hev a private jamboree all by yourself the rest of the afternoon, and then come and wait for me at the top o' the hill yonder."

Thus quit of his gorgeous equipage, he hurried back to Uncle Jim, grasping his ten-thousand dollar draft in his pocket. He was nervous, he was frightened, but he must get rid of the draft and his story, and have it over. But before he could speak, he was unexpectedly stopped by Uncle Jim.

"Now, look yer, Billy boy!" said Uncle Jim; "I got suthin' to say to ye — and I might as well clear it off my mind at once, and then we can start fair agin. Now," he went on, with a half laugh, "was n't it enough for *me* to go on pretendin' I was rich and doing a big business, and gettin' up that lock-box dodge so as ye could n't find out whar I hung out and what I was doin' — was n't it enough for *me* to go on with all this play-actin', but *you*, you long-

legged or'nary cuss! must get up and go to lyin' and play-actin', too!"

"*Me* play-actin'? *Me* lyin'?" gasped Uncle Billy.

Uncle Jim leaned back in his chair and laughed. "Do you think you could fool *me?* Do you think I did n't see through your little game o' going to that swell Oriental, jest as if ye 'd made a big strike — and all the while ye was n't sleepin' or eatin' there, but jest wrastlin' her hash and having a roll down at the Good Cheer! Do you think I did n't spy on ye and find that out? Oh, you long-eared jackass-rabbit!"

He laughed until the tears came into his eyes, and Uncle Billy laughed too, albeit until the laugh on his face became quite fixed, and he was fain to bury his head in his handkerchief.

"And yet," said Uncle Jim, with a deep breath, "gosh! I was frighted — jest for a minit! I thought, mebbe, you *had* made a big strike — when I got your first letter — and I made up my mind what I 'd do! And then I remembered you was jest that kind of an open sluice that could n't keep anythin' to yourself, and you 'd have been sure to have yelled it out to *me* the first thing. So I waited. And I found you out, you old sinner!" He reached forward and dug Uncle Billy in the ribs.

"What *would* you hev done?" said Uncle Billy, after an hysterical collapse.

Uncle Jim's face grew grave again. "I 'd hev — I 'd — hev cl'ared out! Out er 'Frisco! out er Californy! out er Ameriky! I could n't have stud it! Don't think I would hev begrudged ye yer luck! No man would have been gladder than me." He leaned forward again, and laid his hand caressingly upon his partner's arm — "Don't think I 'd hev wanted to take a penny of it — but I — thar! I *could n't* hev stood up under it! To hev had *you*, you that I left behind, comin' down here rollin' in wealth and new

partners and friends, and arrive upon me — and this shanty — and" — he threw towards the corner of the room a terrible gesture, none the less terrible that it was illogical and inconsequent to all that had gone before — "and — and — *that broom!*"

There was a dead silence in the room. With it Uncle Billy seemed to feel himself again transported to the homely cabin at Cedar Camp and that fateful night, with his partner's strange, determined face before him as then. He even fancied that he heard the roaring of the pines without, and did not know that it was the distant sea.

But after a minute Uncle Jim resumed: —

"Of course you've made a little raise somehow, or you would n't be here?"

"Yes," said Uncle Billy eagerly. "Yes! I've got" — He stopped and stammered. "I've got — a — few hundreds."

"Oh, oh!" said Uncle Jim cheerfully. He paused, and then added earnestly, "I say! You ain't got left, over and above your d—d foolishness at the Oriental, as much as five hundred dollars?"

"I've got," said Uncle Billy, blushing a little over his first deliberate and affected lie, — "I've got at least five hundred and seventy-two dollars. Yes," he added tentatively, gazing anxiously at his partner, "I've got at least that."

"Je whillikins!" said Uncle Jim, with a laugh. Then eagerly, "Look here, pard! Then we're on velvet! I've got *nine* hundred; put your *five* with that, and I know a little ranch that we can get for twelve hundred. That's what I've been savin' up for — that's my little game! No more minin' for *me*. It's got a shanty twice as big as our old cabin, nigh on a hundred acres, and two mustangs. We can run it with two Chinamen and jest make it howl! Wot yer say — eh?" He extended his hand.

"I'm in," said Uncle Billy, radiantly grasping Uncle Jim's. But his smile faded, and his clear, simple brow wrinkled in two lines.

Happily Uncle Jim did not notice it. "Now, then, old pard," he said brightly, "we'll have a gay old time to-night — one of our jamborees! I've got some whiskey here and a deck o' cards, and we'll have a little game, you understand, but not for 'keeps' now! No, siree; we'll play for beans."

A sudden light illuminated Uncle Billy's face again, but he said, with a grim desperation, "Not to-night! I've got to go into town. That fren' o' mine expects me to go to the theayter, don't ye see? But I'll be out to-morrow at sun-up, and we'll fix up this thing o' the ranch."

"Seems to me you're kinder stuck on this fren'," grunted Uncle Jim.

Uncle Billy's heart bounded at his partner's jealousy. "No — but I *must*, you know," he returned, with a faint laugh.

"I say — it ain't a *her*, is it?" said Uncle Jim.

Uncle Billy achieved a diabolical wink and a creditable blush at his lie.

"Billy?"

"Jim!"

And under cover of this festive gallantry Uncle Billy escaped. He ran through the gathering darkness, and toiled up the shifting sands to the top of the hill, where he found the carriage waiting.

"Wot," said Uncle Billy in a low confidential tone to the coachman, — "wot do you 'Frisco fellers allow to be the best, biggest, and riskiest gamblin'-saloon here? Suthin' high-toned, you know?"

The negro grinned. It was the usual case of the extravagant spendthrift miner, though perhaps he had expected a different question and order.

"Dey is de 'Polka,' de 'El Dorado,' and de 'Arcade'

I say — it ain't a her, is it?

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saloon, boss," he said, flicking his whip meditatively. "Most gents from de mines prefer de 'Polka,' for dey is dancing wid de gals frown in. But de real *prima facie* place for gents who go for buckin' agin de tiger and straight-out gamblin' is de 'Arcade.'"

"Drive there like thunder!" said Uncle Billy, leaping into the carriage.

. . . . . .

True to his word, Uncle Billy was at his partner's shanty early the next morning. He looked a little tired, but happy, and had brought a draft with him for five hundred and seventy-five dollars, which he explained was the total of his capital. Uncle Jim was overjoyed. They would start for Napa that very day, and conclude the purchase of the ranch; Uncle Jim's sprained foot was a sufficient reason for his giving up his present vocation, which he could also sell at a small profit. His domestic arrangements were very simple; there was nothing to take with him — there was everything to leave behind. And that afternoon, at sunset, the two reunited partners were seated on the deck of the Napa boat as she swung into the stream.

Uncle Billy was gazing over the railing with a look of abstracted relief towards the Golden Gate, where the sinking sun seemed to be drawing towards him in the ocean a golden stream that was forever pouring from the Bay and the three-hilled city beside it. What Uncle Billy was thinking of, or what the picture suggested to him, did not transpire; for Uncle Jim, who, emboldened by his holiday, was luxuriating in an evening paper, suddenly uttered a long-drawn whistle, and moved closer to his abstracted partner. "Look yer," he said, pointing to a paragraph he had evidently jest read, "just you listen to this, and see if we ain't lucky, you and me, to be jest wot we air — trustin' to our own hard work — and not thinkin' o' 'strikes' and 'fortins.' Jest unbutton yer ears, Billy, while I reel off this

yer thing I 've jest struck in the paper, and see what d—d fools some men kin make o' themselves. And that theer reporter wot wrote it — must hev seed it reely ! "

Uncle Jim cleared his throat, and holding the paper close to his eyes read aloud slowly : —

" ' A scene of excitement that recalled the palmy days of '49 was witnessed last night at the Arcade saloon. A stranger, who might have belonged to that reckless epoch, and who bore every evidence of being a successful Pike County miner out on a " spree," appeared at one of the tables with a negro coachman bearing two heavy bags of gold. Selecting a faro-bank as his base of operations, he began to bet heavily and with apparent recklessness, until his play excited the breathless attention of every one. In a few moments he had won a sum variously estimated at from eighty to a hundred thousand dollars. A rumor went round the room that it was a concerted attempt to " break the bank " rather than the drunken freak of a Western miner, dazzled by some successful strike. To this theory the man's careless and indifferent bearing towards his extraordinary gains lent great credence. The attempt, if such it was, however, was unsuccessful. After winning ten times in succession the luck turned, and the unfortunate " bucker " was cleared out not only of his gains, but of his original investment, which may be placed roughly at twenty thousand dollars. This extraordinary play was witnessed by a crowd of excited players, who were less impressed by the magnitude of the stakes than by the perfect *sang-froid* and recklessness of the player, who, it is said, at the close of the game tossed a twenty-dollar gold-piece to the banker and smilingly withdrew. The man was not recognized by any of the *habitués* of the place.'

" There ! " said Uncle Jim, as he hurriedly slurred over the French substantive at the close, " did ye ever see such God-forsaken foolishness ? "

Uncle Billy lifted his abstracted eyes from the current, still pouring its unreturning gold into the sinking sun, and said, with a deprecatory smile, "Never!"

Nor even in the days of prosperity that visited the Great Wheat Ranch of "Fall and Foster" did he ever tell his secret to his partner.

SALOMY JANE'S KISS

ONLY one shot had been fired. It had gone wide of its mark, — the ringleader of the Vigilantes, — and had left Red Pete, who had fired it, covered by their rifles and at their mercy. For his hand had been cramped by hard riding, and his eye distracted by their sudden onset, and so the inevitable end had come. He submitted sullenly to his captors; his companion fugitive and horse-thief gave up the protracted struggle with a feeling not unlike relief. Even the hot and revengeful victors were content. They had taken their men alive. At any time during the long chase they could have brought them down by a rifle-shot, but it would have been unsportsmanlike, and have ended in a free fight, instead of an example. And, for the matter of that, their doom was already sealed. Their end, by a rope and a tree, although not sanctified by law, would have at least the deliberation of justice. It was the tribute paid by the Vigilantes to that order which they had themselves disregarded in the pursuit and capture. Yet this strange logic of the frontier sufficed them, and gave a certain dignity to the climax.

"Ef you 've got anything to say to your folks, say it *now*, and say it quick," said the ringleader.

Red Pete glanced around him. He had been run to earth at his own cabin in the clearing, whence a few relations and friends, mostly women and children, non-combatants, had outflowed, gazing vacantly at the twenty Vigilantes who surrounded them. All were accustomed to scenes of violence, blood-feud, chase, and hardship; it was only the suddenness of the onset and its quick result that

had surprised them. They looked on with dazed curiosity and some disappointment; there had been no fight to speak of — no spectacle! A boy, nephew of Red Pete, got upon the rain-barrel to view the proceedings more comfortably; a tall, handsome, lazy Kentucky girl, a visiting neighbor, leaned against the doorpost, chewing gum. Only a yellow hound was actively perplexed. He could not make out if a hunt were just over or beginning, and ran eagerly backwards and forwards, leaping alternately upon the captives and the captors.

The ringleader repeated his challenge. Red Pete gave a reckless laugh and looked at his wife.

At which Mrs. Red Pete came forward. It seemed that she had much to say, incoherently, furiously, vindictively, to the ringleader. His soul would roast in hell for that day's work! He called himself a man, skunkin' in the open and afraid to show himself except with a crowd of other "Kiyi's" around a house of women and children. Heaping insult upon insult, inveighing against his low blood, his ancestors, his dubious origin, she at last flung out a wild taunt of his invalid wife, the insult of a woman to a woman, until his white face grew rigid, and only that Western-American fetich of the sanctity of sex kept his twitching fingers from the lock of his rifle. Even her husband noticed it, and with a half-authoritative "Let up on that, old gal," and a pat of his freed left hand on her back, took his last parting. The ringleader, still white under the lash of the woman's tongue, turned abruptly to the second captive. "And if *you 've* got anybody to say 'good-by' to, now 's your chance."

The man looked up. Nobody stirred or spoke. He was a stranger there, being a chance confederate picked up by Red Pete, and known to no one. Still young, but an outlaw from his abandoned boyhood, of which father and mother were only a forgotten dream, he loved horses and

stole them, fully accepting the frontier penalty of life for the interference with that animal on which a man's life so often depended. But he understood the good points of a horse, as was shown by the one he bestrode — until a few days before the property of Judge Boompointer. This was his sole distinction.

The unexpected question stirred him for a moment out of the attitude of reckless indifference, for attitude it was, and a part of his profession. But it may have touched him that at that moment he was less than his companion and his virago wife. However, he only shook his head. As he did so his eye casually fell on the handsome girl by the doorpost, who was looking at him. The ringleader, too, may have been touched by his complete loneliness, for *he* hesitated. At the same moment he saw that the girl was looking at his friendless captive.

A grotesque idea struck him.

"Salomy Jane, ye might do worse than come yere and say 'good-by' to a dying man, and him a stranger," he said.

There seemed to be a subtle stroke of poetry and irony in this that equally struck the apathetic crowd. It was well known that Salomy Jane Clay thought no small potatoes of herself, and always held off the local swain with a lazy, nymph-like scorn. Nevertheless, she slowly disengaged herself from the doorpost, and, to everybody's astonishment, lounged with languid grace and outstretched hand towards the prisoner. The color came into the gray, reckless mask which the doomed man wore as her right hand grasped his left, just loosed by his captors. Then she paused; her shy, fawn-like eyes grew bold, and fixed themselves upon him. She took the chewing-gum from her mouth, wiped her red lips with the back of her hand, by a sudden lithe spring placed her foot on his stirrup, and, bounding to the saddle, threw her arms about his neck and pressed a kiss upon his lips.

They remained thus for a hushed moment — the man on the threshold of death, the young woman in the fullness of youth and beauty — linked together. Then the crowd laughed; in the audacious effrontery of the girl's act the ultimate fate of the two men was forgotten. She slipped languidly to the ground; *she* was the focus of all eyes, — she only! The ringleader saw it and his opportunity. He shouted: "Time 's up! Forward!" urged his horse beside his captives, and the next moment the whole cavalcade was sweeping over the clearing into the darkening woods.

Their destination was Sawyer's Crossing, the headquarters of the committee, where the council was still sitting, and where both culprits were to expiate the offense of which that council had already found them guilty. They rode in great and breathless haste, — a haste in which, strangely enough, even the captives seemed to join. That haste possibly prevented them from noticing the singular change which had taken place in the second captive since the episode of the kiss. His high color remained, as if it had burned through his mask of indifference; his eyes were quick, alert, and keen, his mouth half open as if the girl's kiss still lingered there. And that haste had made them careless, for the horse of the man who led him slipped in a gopher-hole, rolled over, unseated his rider, and even dragged the bound and helpless second captive from Judge Boompointer's favorite mare. In an instant they were all on their feet again, but in that supreme moment the second captive felt the cords which bound his arms had slipped to his wrists. By keeping his elbows to his sides, and obliging the others to help him mount, it escaped their notice. By riding close to his captors, and keeping in the crush of the throng, he further concealed the accident, slowly working his hands downwards out of his bonds.

Their way lay through a sylvan wilderness, mid-leg deep

in ferns, whose tall fronds brushed their horses' sides in their furious gallop and concealed the flapping of the captive's loosened cords. The peaceful vista, more suggestive of the offerings of nymph and shepherd than of human sacrifice, was in a strange contrast to this whirlwind rush of stern, armed men. The westering sun pierced the subdued light and the tremor of leaves with yellow lances; birds started into song on blue and dove-like wings, and on either side of the trail of this vengeful storm could be heard the murmur of hidden and tranquil waters. In a few moments they would be on the open ridge, whence sloped the common turnpike to "Sawyer's," a mile away. It was the custom of returning cavalcades to take this hill at headlong speed, with shouts and cries that heralded their coming. They withheld the latter that day, as inconsistent with their dignity; but, emerging from the wood, swept silently like an avalanche down the slope. They were well under way, looking only to their horses, when the second captive slipped his right arm from the bonds and succeeded in grasping the reins that lay trailing on the horse's neck. A sudden vaquero jerk, which the well-trained animal understood, threw him on his haunches with his forelegs firmly planted on the slope. The rest of the cavalcade swept on; the man who was leading the captive's horse by the riata, thinking only of another accident, dropped the line to save himself from being dragged backwards from his horse. The captive wheeled, and the next moment was galloping furiously up the slope.

It was the work of a moment; a trained horse and an experienced hand. The cavalcade had covered nearly fifty yards before they could pull up; the freed captive had covered half that distance uphill. The road was so narrow that only two shots could be fired, and these broke dust two yards ahead of the fugitive. They had not dared to fire low; the horse was the more valuable animal. The

fugitive knew this in his extremity also, and would have gladly taken a shot in his own leg to spare that of his horse. Five men were detached to recapture or kill him. The latter seemed inevitable. But he had calculated his chances; before they could reload he had reached the woods again; winding in and out between the pillared tree trunks, he offered no mark. They knew his horse was superior to their own; at the end of two hours they returned, for he had disappeared without track or trail. The end was briefly told in the "Sierra Record:" —

"Red Pete, the notorious horse-thief, who had so long eluded justice, was captured and hung by the Sawyer's Crossing Vigilantes last week; his confederate, unfortunately, escaped on a valuable horse belonging to Judge Boompointer. The judge had refused one thousand dollars for the horse only a week before. As the thief, who is still at large, would find it difficult to dispose of so valuable an animal without detection, the chances are against either of them turning up again."

. . . . . .

Salomy Jane watched the cavalcade until it had disappeared. Then she became aware that her brief popularity had passed. Mrs. Red Pete, in stormy hysterics, had included her in a sweeping denunciation of the whole universe, possibly for simulating an emotion in which she herself was deficient. The other women hated her for her momentary exaltation above them; only the children still admired her as one who had undoubtedly "canoodled" with a man "a-going to be hung" — a daring flight beyond their wildest ambition. Salomy Jane accepted the change with charming unconcern. She put on her yellow nankeen sunbonnet, — a hideous affair that would have ruined any other woman, but which only enhanced the piquancy of her fresh brunette skin, — tied the strings, letting the blue-black braids escape below its frilled curtain

behind, jumped on her mustang with a casual display of agile ankles in shapely white stockings, whistled to the hound, and waving her hand with a "So long, sonny!" to the lately bereft but admiring nephew, flapped and fluttered away in her short brown holland gown.

Her father's house was four miles distant. Contrasted with the cabin she had just quitted, it was a superior dwelling, with a long "lean-to" at the rear, which brought the eaves almost to the ground and made it look like a low triangle. It had a long barn and cattle sheds, for Madison Clay was a "great" stock-raiser and the owner of a "quarter section." It had a sitting-room and a parlor organ, whose transportation thither had been a marvel of "packing." These things were supposed to give Salomy Jane an undue importance, but the girl's reserve and inaccessibility to local advances were rather the result of a cool, lazy temperament and the preoccupation of a large, protecting admiration for her father, for some years a widower. For Mr. Madison Clay's life had been threatened in one or two feuds, — it was said, not without cause, — and it is possible that the pathetic spectacle of her father doing his visiting with a shotgun may have touched her closely and somewhat prejudiced her against the neighboring masculinity. The thought that cattle, horses, and "quarter section" would one day be hers did not disturb her calm. As for Mr. Clay, he accepted her as housewifely, though somewhat "interfering," and, being one of "his own womankind," therefore not without some degree of merit.

"Wot 's this yer I 'm hearin' of your doin's over at Red Pete's? Honeyfoglin' with a horse-thief, eh?" said Mr. Clay two days later at breakfast.

"I reckon you heard about the straight thing, then," said Salomy Jane unconcernedly, without looking round.

"What do you kalkilate Rube will say to it? What are you goin' to tell *him?*" said Mr. Clay sarcastically.

"Rube," or Reuben Waters, was a swain supposed to be favored particularly by Mr. Clay. Salomy Jane looked up.

"I'll tell him that when *he's* on his way to be hung, I'll kiss him, — not till then," said the young lady brightly.

This delightful witticism suited the paternal humor, and Mr. Clay smiled; but, nevertheless, he frowned a moment afterwards.

"But this yer hoss-thief got away arter all, and that 's a hoss of a different color," he said grimly.

Salomy Jane put down her knife and fork. This was certainly a new and different phase of the situation. She had never thought of it before, and, strangely enough, for the first time she became interested in the man. "Got away?" she repeated. "Did they let him off?"

"Not much," said her father briefly. "Slipped his cords, and going down the grade pulled up short, just like a vaquero agin a lassoed bull, almost draggin' the man leadin' him off his hoss, and then skyuted up the grade. For that matter, on that hoss o' Judge Boompointer's he mout have dragged the whole posse of 'em down on their knees ef he liked! Sarved 'em right, too. Instead of stringin' him up afore the door, or shootin' him on sight, they must allow to take him down afore the hull committee 'for an example.' 'Example' be blowed! Ther' 's example enough when some stranger comes unbeknownst slap onter a man hanged to a tree and plugged full of holes. *That 's* an example, and *he* knows what it means. Wot more do ye want? But then those Vigilantes is allus clingin' and hangin' onter some mere scrap o' the law they 're pretendin' to despise. It makes me sick! Why, when Jake Myers shot your ole Aunt Viney's second husband, and I laid in wait for Jake afterwards in the Butternut Hollow, did *I* tie him to his hoss and fetch him down to your Aunt Viney's cabin 'for an example' before I plugged

him? No!" in deep disgust. "No! Why, I just meandered through the wood, careless-like, till he comes out, and I just rode up to him, and I said" —

But Salomy Jane had heard her father's story before. Even one's dearest relatives are apt to become tiresome in narration. "I know, dad," she interrupted; "but this yer man, — this hoss-thief, — did *he* get clean away without gettin' hurt at all?"

"He did, and unless he 's fool enough to sell the hoss, he kin keep away, too. So ye see, ye can't ladle out purp stuff about a 'dyin' stranger' to Rube. He won't swaller it."

"All the same, dad," returned the girl cheerfully, "I reckon to say it, and say *more;* I 'll tell him that ef *he* manages to get away too, I 'll marry him — there! But ye don't ketch Rube takin' any such risks in gettin' ketched, or in gettin' away arter!"

Madison Clay smiled grimly, pushed back his chair, rose, dropped a perfunctory kiss on his daughter's hair, and, taking his shotgun from the corner, departed on a peaceful Samaritan mission to a cow who had dropped a calf in the far pasture. Inclined as he was to Reuben's wooing from his eligibility as to property, he was conscious that he was sadly deficient in certain qualities inherent in the Clay family. It certainly would be a kind of *mésalliance.*

Left to herself, Salomy Jane stared a long while at the coffee-pot, and then called the two squaws who assisted her in her household duties, to clear away the things while she went up to her own room to make her bed. Here she was confronted with a possible prospect of that proverbial bed she might be making in her willfulness, and on which she must lie, in the photograph of a somewhat serious young man of refined features — Reuben Waters — stuck in her window-frame. Salomy Jane smiled over her last witticism regarding him and enjoyed it, like your true humorist, and then, catching sight of her own handsome face in the little

mirror, smiled again. But was n't it funny about that horse-thief getting off after all ? Good Lordy ! Fancy Reuben hearing he was alive and going round with that kiss of hers set on his lips ! She laughed again, a little more abstractedly. And he had returned it like a man, holding her tight and almost breathless, and he going to be hung the next minute ! Salomy Jane had been kissed at other times, by force, chance, or stratagem. In a certain ingenuous forfeit game of the locality, known as " I 'm a-pinin'," many had " pined " for a " sweet kiss " from Salomy Jane, which she had yielded in a sense of honor and fair play. She had never been kissed like this before — she would never again ; and yet the man was alive ! And behold, she could see in the mirror that she was blushing !

She should hardly know him again. A young man with very bright eyes, a flushed and sunburnt cheek, a kind of fixed look in the face, and no beard ; no, none that she could feel. Yet he was not at all like Reuben, not a bit. She took Reuben's picture from the window, and laid it on her work-box. And to think she did not even know this young man's name ! That was queer. To be kissed by a man whom she might never know ! Of course he knew hers. She wondered if he remembered it and her. But of course he was so glad to get off with his life that he never thought of anything else. Yet she did not give more than four or five minutes to these speculations, and, like a sensible girl, thought of something else. Once again, however, in opening the closet, she found the brown holland gown she had worn on the day before ; thought it very unbecoming, and regretted that she had not worn her best gown on her visit to Red Pete's cottage. On such an occasion she really might have been more impressive.

When her father came home that night she asked him the news. No, they had *not* captured the second horse-thief, who was still at large. Judge Boompointer talked of in-

voking the aid of the despised law. It remained, then, to see whether the horse-thief was fool enough to try to get rid of the animal. Red Pete's body had been delivered to his widow. Perhaps it would only be neighborly for Salomy Jane to ride over to the funeral. But Salomy Jane did not take to the suggestion kindly, nor yet did she explain to her father that, as the other man was still living, she did not care to undergo a second disciplining at the widow's hands. Nevertheless, she contrasted her situation with that of the widow with a new and singular satisfaction. It might have been Red Pete who had escaped. But he had not the grit of the nameless one. She had already settled his heroic quality.

"Ye ain't harkenin' to me, Salomy."

Salomy Jane started.

"Here I'm askin' ye if ye've see that hound Phil Larrabee sneaking by yer to-day?"

Salomy Jane had not. But she became interested and self-reproachful, for she knew that Phil Larrabee was one of her father's enemies. "He would n't dare to go by here unless he knew you were out," she said quickly.

"That's what gets me," he said, scratching his grizzled head. "I've been kind o' thinkin' o' him all day, and one of them Chinamen said he saw him at Sawyer's Crossing. He was a kind of friend o' Pete's wife. That's why I thought yer might find out ef he'd been there." Salomy Jane grew more self-reproachful at her father's self-interest in her "neighborliness." "But that ain't all," continued Mr. Clay. "Thar was tracks over the far pasture that warn't mine. I followed them, and they went round and round the house two or three times, ez ef they mout hev bin prowlin', and then I lost 'em in the woods again. It's just like that sneakin' hound Larrabee to hev bin lyin' in wait for me and afraid to meet a man fair and square in the open."

"You just lie low, dad, for a day or two more, and let me do a little prowlin'," said the girl, with sympathetic indignation in her dark eyes. "Ef it's that skunk, I 'll spot him soon enough and let you know whar he 's hiding."

"You 'll just stay where ye are, Salomy," said her father decisively. "This ain't no woman's work — though I ain't sayin' you have n't got more head for it than some men I know."

Nevertheless, that night, after her father had gone to bed, Salomy Jane sat by the open window of the sitting-room in an apparent attitude of languid contemplation, but alert and intent of eye and ear. It was a fine moonlit night. Two pines near the door, solitary pickets of the serried ranks of distant forest, cast long shadows like paths to the cottage, and sighed their spiced breath in the windows. For there was no frivolity of vine or flower round Salomy Jane's bower. The clearing was too recent, the life too practical, for vanities like these. But the moon added a vague elusiveness to everything, softened the rigid outlines of the sheds, gave shadows to the lidless windows, and touched with merciful indirectness the hideous débris of refuse gravel and the gaunt scars of burnt vegetation before the door. Even Salomy Jane was affected by it, and exhaled something between a sigh and a yawn with the breath of the pines. Then she suddenly sat upright.

Her quick ear had caught a faint "click, click," in the direction of the wood; her quicker instinct and rustic training enabled her to determine that it was the ring of a horse's shoe on flinty ground; her knowledge of the locality told her it came from the spot where the trail passed over an outcrop of flint, scarcely a quarter of a mile from where she sat, and within the clearing. It was no errant "stock," for the foot was *shod* with iron; it was a mounted trespasser by night, and boded no good to a man like Clay.

She rose, threw her shawl over her head, more for dis-

guise than shelter, and passed out of the door. A sudden impulse made her seize her father's shotgun from the corner where it stood, — not that she feared any danger to herself, but that it was an excuse. She made directly for the wood, keeping in the shadow of the pines as long as she could. At the fringe she halted; whoever was there must pass her before reaching the house.

Then there seemed to be a suspense of all nature. Everything was deadly still — even the moonbeams appeared no longer tremulous; soon there was a rustle as of some stealthy animal among the ferns, and then a dismounted man stepped into the moonlight. It was the horse-thief — the man she had kissed!

For a wild moment a strange fancy seized her usually sane intellect and stirred her temperate blood. The news they had told her was *not* true; he had been hung, and this was his ghost! He looked as white and spirit-like in the moonlight, dressed in the same clothes, as when she saw him last. He had evidently seen her approaching, and moved quickly to meet her. But in his haste he stumbled slightly; she reflected suddenly that ghosts did not stumble, and a feeling of relief came over her. And it was no assassin of her father that had been prowling around — only this unhappy fugitive. A momentary color came into her cheek; her coolness and hardihood returned; it was with a tinge of sauciness in her voice that she said: —

"I reckoned you were a ghost."

"I mout have been," he said, looking at her fixedly; "but I reckon I 'd have come back here all the same."

"It 's a little riskier comin' back alive," she said, with a levity that died on her lips, for a singular nervousness, half fear and half expectation, was beginning to take the place of her relief of a moment ago. "Then it was *you* who was prowlin' round and makin' tracks in the far pasture?"

"Yes; I came straight here when I got away."

She felt his eyes were burning her, but did not dare to raise her own. "Why," she began, hesitated, and ended vaguely. "*How* did you get here?"

"You helped me!"

"I?"

"Yes. That kiss you gave me put life into me — gave me strength to get away. I swore to myself I 'd come back and thank you, alive or dead."

Every word he said she could have anticipated, so plain the situation seemed to her now. And every word he said she knew was the truth. Yet her cool common sense struggled against it.

"What 's the use of your escaping, ef you 're comin' back here to be ketched again?" she said pertly.

He drew a little nearer to her, but seemed to her the more awkward as she resumed her self-possession. His voice, too, was broken, as if by exhaustion, as he said, catching his breath at intervals: —

"I 'll tell you. You did more for me than you think. You made another man o' me. I never had a man, woman, or child do to me what you did. I never had a friend — only a pal like Red Pete, who picked me up 'on shares.' I want to quit this yer — what I 'm doin'. I want to begin by doin' the square thing to you" — He stopped, breathed hard, and then said brokenly, "My hoss is over thar, staked out. I want to give him to you. Judge Boompointer will give you a thousand dollars for him. I ain't lyin'; it 's God's truth! I saw it on the handbill agin a tree. Take him, and I 'll get away afoot. Take him. It 's the only thing I can do for you, and I know it don't half pay for what you did. Take it; your father can get a reward for you, if you can't."

Such were the ethics of this strange locality that neither the man who made the offer nor the girl to whom it was

made was struck by anything that seemed illogical or indelicate, or at all inconsistent with justice or the horse-thief's real conversion. Salomy Jane nevertheless dissented, from another and weaker reason.

"I don't want your hoss, though I reckon dad might; but you're just starvin'. I'll get suthin'." She turned towards the house.

"Say you'll take the hoss first," he said, grasping her hand. At the touch she felt herself coloring and struggled, expecting perhaps another kiss. But he dropped her hand. She turned again with a saucy gesture, said, "Hol' on; I'll come right back," and slipped away, the mere shadow of a coy and flying nymph in the moonlight, until she reached the house.

Here she not only procured food and whiskey, but added a long dust-coat and hat of her father's to her burden. They would serve as a disguise for him and hide that heroic figure, which she thought everybody must now know as she did. Then she rejoined him breathlessly. But he put the food and whiskey aside.

"Listen," he said; "I've turned the hoss into your corral. You'll find him there in the morning, and no one will know but that he got lost and joined the other horses."

Then she burst out. "But you — *you* — what will become of you? You'll be ketched!"

"I'll manage to get away," he said in a low voice, "ef — ef" —

"Ef what?" she said tremblingly.

"Ef you'll put the heart in me again, — as you did!" he gasped.

She tried to laugh — to move away. She could do neither. Suddenly he caught her in his arms, with a long kiss, which she returned again and again. Then they stood embraced as they had embraced two days before, but

no longer the same. For the cool, lazy Salomy Jane had been transformed into another woman — a passionate, clinging savage. Perhaps something of her father's blood had surged within her at that supreme moment. The man stood erect and determined.

"Wot's your name?" she whispered quickly. It was a woman's quickest way of defining her feelings.

"Dart."

"Yer first name?"

"Jack."

"Let me go now, Jack. Lie low in the woods till tomorrow sunup. I'll come again."

He released her. Yet she lingered a moment. "Put on those things," she said, with a sudden happy flash of eyes and teeth, "and lie close till I come." And then she sped away home.

But midway up the distance she felt her feet going slower, and something at her heartstrings seemed to be pulling her back. She stopped, turned, and glanced to where he had been standing. Had she seen him then, she might have returned. But he had disappeared. She gave her first sigh, and then ran quickly again. It must be nearly ten o'clock! It was not very long to morning!

She was within a few steps of her own door, when the sleeping woods and silent air appeared to suddenly awake with a sharp "crack!"

She stopped, paralyzed. Another "crack!" followed, that echoed over to the far corral. She recalled herself instantly and dashed off wildly to the woods again.

As she ran she thought of one thing only. He had been "dogged" by one of his old pursuers and attacked. But there were two shots, and he was unarmed. Suddenly she remembered that she had left her father's gun standing against the tree where they were talking. Thank God! she may again have saved him. She ran to the tree; the gun

was gone. She ran hither and thither, dreading at every step to fall upon his lifeless body. A new thought struck her; she ran to the corral. The horse was not there! He must have been able to regain it, and escaped, *after* the shots had been fired. She drew a long breath of relief, but it was caught up in an apprehension of alarm. Her father, awakened from his sleep by the shots, was hurriedly approaching her.

"What 's up now, Salomy Jane?" he demanded excitedly.

"Nothin'," said the girl, with an effort. "Nothin', at least, that *I* can find." She was usually truthful because fearless, and a lie stuck in her throat; but she was no longer fearless, thinking of *him*. "I was n't abed; so I ran out as soon as I heard the shots fired," she answered in return to his curious gaze.

"And you 've hid my gun somewhere where it can't be found," he said reproachfully. "Ef it was that sneak Larrabee, and he fired them shots to lure me out, he might have potted me, without a show, a dozen times in the last five minutes."

She had not thought since of her father's enemy! It might indeed have been he who had attacked Jack. But she made a quick point of the suggestion. "Run in, dad, run in and find the gun; you 've got no show out here without it." She seized him by the shoulders from behind, shielding him from the woods, and hurried him, half expostulating, half struggling, to the house.

But there no gun was to be found. It was strange; it must have been mislaid in some corner! Was he sure he had not left it in the barn? But no matter now. The danger was over; the Larrabee trick had failed; he must go to bed now, and in the morning they would make a search together. At the same time she had inwardly resolved to rise before him and make another search of the

wood, and perhaps — fearful joy as she recalled her promise! — find Jack alive and well, awaiting her!

Salomy Jane slept little that night, nor did her father. But towards morning he fell into a tired man's slumber until the sun was well up the horizon. Far different was it with his daughter: she lay with her face to the window, her head half lifted to catch every sound, from the creaking of the sun-warped shingles above her head to the far-off moan of the rising wind in the pine-trees. Sometimes she fell into a breathless, half-ecstatic trance, living over every moment of the stolen interview; feeling the fugitive's arm still around her, his kisses on her lips; hearing his whispered voice in her ears — the birth of her new life! This was followed again by a period of agonizing dread — that he might even then be lying, his life ebbing away, in the woods, with her name on his lips, and she resting here inactive, until she half started from her bed to go to his succor. And this went on until a pale opal glow came into the sky, followed by a still paler pink on the summit of the white Sierras, when she rose and hurriedly began to dress. Still so sanguine was her hope of meeting him, that she lingered yet a moment to select the brown holland skirt and yellow sunbonnet she had worn when she first saw him. And she had only seen him twice! Only *twice!* It would be cruel, too cruel, not to see him again!

She crept softly down the stairs, listening to the long-drawn breathing of her father in his bedroom, and then, by the light of a guttering candle, scrawled a note to him, begging him not to trust himself out of the house until she returned from her search, and leaving the note open on the table, swiftly ran out into the growing day.

Three hours afterwards Mr. Madison Clay awoke to the sound of loud knocking. At first this forced itself upon his consciousness as his daughter's regular morning summons, and was responded to by a grunt of recognition and a nes-

tling closer in the blankets. Then he awoke with a start and a muttered oath, remembering the events of last night, and his intention to get up early, and rolled out of bed. Becoming aware by this time that the knocking was at the outer door, and hearing the shout of a familiar voice, he hastily pulled on his boots, his jean trousers, and fastening a single suspender over his shoulder as he clattered downstairs, stood in the lower room. The door was open, and waiting upon the threshold was his kinsman, an old ally in many a blood-feud — Breckenridge Clay!

"You *are* a cool one, Mad!" said the latter in half-admiring indignation.

"What 's up?" said the bewildered Madison.

"*You* ought to be, and scootin' out o' this," said Breckenridge grimly. "It 's all very well to 'know nothin';' but here Phil Larrabee's friends hev just picked him up, drilled through with slugs and deader nor a crow, and now they 're lettin' loose Larrabee's two half-brothers on you. And you must go like a derned fool and leave these yer things behind you in the bresh," he went on querulously, lifting Madison Clay's dust-coat, hat, and shotgun from his horse, which stood saddled at the door. "Luckily I picked them up in the woods comin' here. Ye ain't got more than time to get over the state line and among your folks thar afore they 'll be down on you. Hustle, old man! What are you gawkin' and starin' at?"

Madison Clay had stared amazed and bewildered — horror-stricken. The incidents of the past night for the first time flashed upon him clearly — hopelessly! The shots; his finding Salomy Jane alone in the woods; her confusion and anxiety to rid herself of him; the disappearance of the shotgun; and now this new discovery of the taking of his hat and coat for a disguise! *She* had killed Phil Larrabee in that disguise, after provoking his first harmless shot! She, his own child, Salomy Jane, had disgraced herself by

a man's crime; had disgraced him by usurping his right, and taking a mean advantage, by deceit, of a foe!

"Gimme that gun," he said hoarsely.

Breckenridge handed him the gun in wonder and slowly gathering suspicion. Madison examined nipple and muzzle; one barrel had been discharged. It was true! The gun dropped from his hand.

"Look here, old man," said Breckenridge, with a darkening face, "there 's bin no foul play here. Thar 's bin no hiring of men, no deputy to do this job. *You* did it fair and square — yourself?"

"Yes, by God!" burst out Madison Clay, in a hoarse voice. "Who says I did n't?"

Reassured, yet believing that Madison Clay had nerved himself for the act by an over-draught of whiskey, which had affected his memory, Breckenridge said curtly, "Then wake up and 'lite' out, ef ye want me to stand by you."

"Go to the corral and pick me out a hoss," said Madison slowly, yet not without a certain dignity of manner. "I 've suthin' to say to Salomy Jane afore I go." He was holding her scribbled note, which he had just discovered, in his shaking hand.

Struck by his kinsman's manner, and knowing the dependent relations of father and daughter, Breckenridge nodded and hurried away. Left to himself, Madison Clay ran his fingers through his hair, and straightened out the paper on which Salomy Jane had scrawled her note, turned it over, and wrote on the back: —

You might have told me you did it, and not leave your ole father to find it out how you disgraced yourself and him, too, by a low-down, underhanded, woman's trick! I 've said I done it, and took the blame myself, and all the sneakiness of it that folks suspect. If I get away alive — and I don't care much which — you need n't foller. The

house and stock are yours; but you ain't any longer the daughter of your disgraced father,

MADISON CLAY.

He had scarcely finished the note when, with a clatter of hoofs and a led horse, Breckenridge reappeared at the door elate and triumphant. "You 're in nigger luck, Mad! I found that stole hoss of Judge Boompointer's had got away and strayed among your stock in the corral. Take him and you 're safe; he can't be outrun this side of the state line."

"I ain't no hoss-thief," said Madison grimly.

"Nobody sez ye are, but you 'd be wuss — a fool — ef you did n't take him. I 'm testimony that you found him among your hosses; I 'll tell Judge Boompointer you 've got him, and ye kin send him back when you 're safe. The judge will be mighty glad to get him back, and call it quits. So ef you 've writ to Salomy Jane, come."

Madison Clay no longer hesitated. Salomy Jane might return at any moment, — it would be part of her "fool womanishness," — and he was in no mood to see her before a third party. He laid the note on the table, gave a hurried glance around the house, which he grimly believed he was leaving forever, and, striding to the door, leaped on the stolen horse, and swept away with his kinsman.

But that note lay for a week undisturbed on the table in full view of the open door. The house was invaded by leaves, pine cones, birds, and squirrels during the hot, silent, empty days, and at night by shy, stealthy creatures, but never again, day or night, by any of the Clay family. It was known in the district that Clay had flown across the state line, his daughter was believed to have joined him the next day, and the house was supposed to be locked up. It lay off the main road, and few passed that way. The starving cattle in the corral at last broke bounds and spread

over the woods. And one night a stronger blast than usual swept through the house and carried the note from the table to the floor, where, whirled into a crack in the flooring, it slowly rotted.

But though the sting of her father's reproach was spared her, Salomy Jane had no need of the letter to know what had happened. For as she entered the woods in the dim light of that morning, she saw the figure of Dart gliding from the shadow of a pine towards her. The unaffected cry of joy that rose from her lips died there as she caught sight of his face in the open light.

"You are hurt," she said, clutching his arm passionately.

"No," he said. "But I would n't mind that if" —

"You 're thinkin' I was afeard to come back last night when I heard the shootin', but I *did* come," she went on feverishly. "I ran back here when I heard the two shots, but you were gone. I went to the corral, but your hoss was n't there, and I thought you 'd got away."

"I *did* get away," said Dart gloomily. "I killed the man, thinkin' he was huntin' *me*, and forgettin' I was disguised. He thought I was your father."

"Yes," said the girl joyfully, "he was after dad, and *you* — you killed him." She again caught his hand admiringly.

But he did not respond. Possibly there were points of honor which this horse-thief felt vaguely with her father. "Listen," he said grimly. "Others think it was your father killed him. When *I* did it — for he fired at me first — I ran to the corral again and took my hoss, thinkin' I might be follered. I made a clear circuit of the house, and when I found he was the only one, and no one was follerin', I come back here and took off my disguise. Then I heard his friends find him in the wood, and I know they suspected your father. And then another man come

through the woods while I was hidin' and found the clothes and took them away." He stopped and stared at her gloomily.

But all this was unintelligible to the girl. "Dad would have got the better of him ef you had n't," she said eagerly, "so what 's the difference?"

"All the same," he said gloomily, "I must take his place."

She did not understand, but turned her head to her master. "Then you 'll go back with me and tell him *all?*" she said obediently.

"Yes," he said.

She put her hand in his, and they crept out of the wood together. She foresaw a thousand difficulties, but, chiefest of all, that he did not love as she did. *She* would not have taken these risks against their happiness.

But alas for ethics and heroism. As they were issuing from the wood they heard the sound of galloping hoofs, and had barely time to hide themselves before Madison Clay, on the stolen horse of Judge Boompointer, swept past them with his kinsman.

Salomy Jane turned to her lover.

. . . . . .

And here I might, as a moral romancer, pause, leaving the guilty, passionate girl eloped with her disreputable lover, destined to lifelong shame and misery, misunderstood to the last by a criminal, fastidious parent. But I am confronted by certain facts, on which this romance is based. A month later a handbill was posted on one of the sentinel pines, announcing that the property would be sold by auction to the highest bidder by Mrs. John Dart, daughter of Madison Clay, Esq., and it was sold accordingly. Still later — by ten years — the chronicler of these pages visited a certain "stock" or "breeding farm," in the "Blue Grass Country," famous for the popular racers it has produced.

He was told that the owner was the "best judge of horse-flesh in the country." "Small wonder," added his informant, "for they say as a young man out in California he was a horse-thief, and only saved himself by eloping with some rich farmer's daughter. But he 's a straight-out and respectable man now, whose word about horses can't be bought; and as for his wife, *she 's* a beauty! To see her at the 'Springs,' rigged out in the latest fashion, you 'd never think she had ever lived out of New York or was n't the wife of one of its millionaires."

THE JUDGMENT OF BOLINAS PLAIN

THE wind was getting up on the Bolinas Plain. It had started the fine alkaline dust along the level stage road, so that even that faint track, the only break in the monotony of the landscape, seemed fainter than ever. But the dust cloud was otherwise a relief; it took the semblance of distant woods where there was no timber, of moving teams where there was no life. And as Sue Beasley, standing in the doorway of One Spring House that afternoon, shading her sandy lashes with her small red hand, glanced along the desolate track, even *her* eyes, trained to the dreary prospect, were once or twice deceived.

"Sue!"

It was a man's voice from within. Sue took no notice of it, but remained with her hand shading her eyes.

"Sue! Wot yer yawpin' at thar?"

"Yawpin'" would seem to have been the local expression for her abstraction, since, without turning her head, she answered slowly and languidly: "Reckoned I see'd som' un on the stage road. But 't ain't nothin' nor nobody."

Both voices had in their accents and delivery something of the sadness and infinite protraction of the plain. But the woman's had a musical possibility in its long-drawn cadence, while the man's was only monotonous and wearying. And as she turned back into the room again, and confronted her companion, there was the like difference in their appearance. Ira Beasley, her husband, had suffered from the combined effects of indolence, carelessness, misadventure, and disease. Two of his fingers had been cut off by

a scythe, his thumb and part of his left ear had been blown away by an overcharged gun; his knees were crippled by rheumatism, and one foot was lame from ingrowing nails, — deviations that, however, did not tend to correct the original angularities of his frame. His wife, on the other hand, had a pretty figure, which still retained — they were childless — the rounded freshness of maidenhood. Her features were irregular, yet not without a certain piquancy of outline; her hair had the two shades sometimes seen in imperfect blondes, and her complexion the sallowness of combined exposure and alkaline assimilation.

She had lived there since, an angular girl of fifteen, she had been awkwardly helped by Ira from the tail-board of the emigrant wagon in which her mother had died two weeks before, and which was making its first halt on the Californian plains, before Ira's door. On the second day of their halt Ira had tried to kiss her while she was drawing water, and had received the contents of the bucket instead, — the girl knowing her own value. On the third day Ira had some conversation with her father regarding locations and stock. On the fourth day this conversation was continued in the presence of the girl; on the fifth day the three walked to Parson Davies's house, four miles away, where Ira and Sue were married. The romance of a week had taken place within the confines of her present view from the doorway; the episode of her life might have been shut in in that last sweep of her sandy lashes.

Nevertheless, at that moment some instinct, she knew not what, impelled her when her husband left the room to put down the dish she was washing, and, with the towel lapped over her bare pretty arms, to lean once more against the doorpost, lazily looking down the plain. A cylindrical cloud of dust trailing its tattered skirt along the stage road suddenly assaulted the house, and for an instant enveloped it. As it whirled away again something emerged, or rather

dropped from its skirts behind the little cluster of low bushes which encircled the "One Spring." It was a man.

"Thar! I knew it was suthin'," she began aloud, but the words somehow died upon her lips. Then she turned and walked towards the inner door, wherein her husband had disappeared, — but here stopped again irresolutely. Then she suddenly walked through the outer door into the road and made directly for the spring. The figure of a man crouching, covered with dust, half rose from the bushes when she reached them. She was not frightened, for he seemed utterly exhausted, and there was a singular mixture of shame, hesitation, and entreaty in his broken voice as he gasped out: —

"Look here! — I say! hide me somewhere, won't you? Just for a little. You see — the fact is — I 'm chased! They 're hunting me now, — they 're just behind me. Anywhere will do till they go by! Tell you all about it another time. Quick! Please do!"

In all this there was nothing dramatic nor even startling to her. Nor did there seem to be any present danger impending to the man. He did not look like a horse-thief nor a criminal. And he had tried to laugh, half apologetically, half bitterly, — the consciousness of a man who had to ask help of a woman at such a moment.

She gave a quick glance towards the house. He followed her eyes, and said hurriedly: "Don't tell on me. Don't let any one see me. I 'm trusting you."

"Come," she said suddenly. "Get on *this* side."

He understood her, and slipped to her side, half creeping, half crouching like a dog behind her skirts, but keeping her figure between him and the house as she moved deliberately towards the barn, scarce fifty yards away. When she reached it she opened the half-door quickly, said: "In there — at the top — among the hay" — closed it, and was turning away, when there came a faint rapping from

within. She opened the door again impatiently; the man said hastily: "Wanted to tell you — it was a man who insulted a *woman!* I went for him, you see — and" —

But she shut the door sharply. The fugitive had made a blunder. The importation of her own uncertain sex into the explanation did not help him. She kept on towards the house, however, without the least trace of excitement or agitation in her manner, entered the front door again, walked quietly to the door of the inner room, glanced in, saw that her husband was absorbed in splicing a riata, and had evidently not missed her, and returned quietly to her dish-washing. With this singular difference: a few moments before she had seemed inattentive and careless of what she was doing, as if from some abstraction; now, when she was actually abstracted, her movements were mechanically perfect and deliberate. She carefully held up a dish and examined it minutely for cracks, rubbing it cautiously with the towel, but seeing all the while only the man she had left in the barn. A few moments elapsed. Then there came another rush of wind around the house, a drifting cloud of dust before the door, the clatter of hoofs, and a quick shout.

Her husband reached the door, from the inner room, almost as quickly as she did. They both saw in the road two armed mounted men — one of whom Ira recognized as the sheriff's deputy.

"Has anybody been here, just now?" he asked sharply.

"No."

"Seen anybody go by?" he continued.

"No. What 's up?"

"One of them circus jumpers stabbed Hal Dudley over the table in Dolores monte shop last night, and got away this morning. We hunted him into the plain and lost him somewhere in this d—d dust."

"Why, Sue reckoned she saw suthin' just now," said Ira, with a flash of recollection. "Did n't ye, Sue?"

"Why the h—ll did n't she say it before? — I beg your pardon, ma'am; did n't see you; you 'll excuse haste."

Both the men's hats were in their hands, embarrassed yet gratified smiles on their faces, as Sue came forward. There was the faintest of color in her sallow cheek, a keen brilliancy in her eyes; she looked singularly pretty. Even Ira felt a slight ante-nuptial stirring through his monotonously wedded years.

The young woman walked out, folding the towel around her red hands and forearms, — leaving the rounded whiteness of bared elbow and upper arm in charming contrast, — and looked gravely past the admiring figures that nearly touched her own. "It was somewhar over thar," she said lazily, pointing up the road in the opposite direction to the barn, "but I ain't sure it *was* any one."

"Then he 'd already *passed* the house afore you saw him?" said the deputy.

"I reckon — if it *was* him," returned Sue.

"He must have got on," said the deputy; "but then he runs like a deer; it 's his trade."

"Wot trade?"

"Acrobat."

"Wot 's that?"

The two men were delighted at this divine simplicity. "A man who runs, jumps, climbs — and all that sort, in the circus."

"But is n't he runnin', jumpin', and climbin' away from ye now?" she continued with adorable naïveté.

The deputy smiled, but straightened in the saddle. "We 're bound to come up with him afore he reaches Lowville; and between that and this house it 's a dead level, where a gopher could n't leave his hole without your spottin' him a mile off! Good-by!" The words were addressed to Ira, but the parting glance was directed to the pretty wife as the two men galloped away.

An odd uneasiness at this sudden revelation of his wife's prettiness and its evident effect upon his visitors came over Ira. It resulted in his addressing the empty space before his door with, "Well, ye won't ketch much if ye go on yawpin' and dawdlin' with women-folks like this;" and he was unreasonably delighted at the pretty assent of disdain and scorn which sparkled in his wife's eyes as she added: —

"Not much, I reckon!"

"That's the kind of official trash we have to pay taxes to keep up," said Ira, who somehow felt that if public policy was not amenable to private sentiment there was no value in free government. Mrs. Beasley, however, complacently resumed her dish-washing, and Ira returned to his riata in the adjoining room. For quite an interval there was no sound but the occasional click of a dish laid upon its pile, with fingers that, however, were firm and untremulous. Presently Sue's low voice was heard.

"Wonder if that deputy caught anything yet. I've a good mind to meander up the road and see."

But the question brought Ira to the door with a slight return of his former uneasiness. He had no idea of subjecting his wife to another admiring interview. "I reckon I'll go myself," he said dubiously; "*you'd* better stay and look after the house."

Her eyes brightened as she carried a pile of plates to the dresser; it was possible she had foreseen this compromise. "Yes," she said cheerfully, "you could go farther than me."

Ira reflected. He could also send them about their business if they thought of returning. He lifted his hat from the floor, took his rifle down carefully from its pegs, and slouched out into the road. Sue watched him until he was well away, then flew to the back door, stopping only an instant to look at her face in a small mirror on the wall, — yet without noticing her new prettiness, — then ran to the

barn. Casting a backward glance at the diminishing figure of her husband in the distance, she threw open the door and shut it quickly behind her. At first the abrupt change from the dazzling outer plain to the deep shadows of the barn bewildered her. She saw before her a bucket half filled with dirty water, and a quantity of wet straw littering the floor; then lifting her eyes to the hay-loft, she detected the figure of the fugitive, unclothed from the waist upward, emerging from the loose hay in which he had evidently been drying himself. Whether it was the excitement of his perilous situation, or whether the perfect symmetry of his bared bust and arms — unlike anything she had ever seen before — clothed him with the cold ideality of a statue, she could not say, but she felt no shock of modesty; while the man, accustomed to the public half-exposure in tights and spangles, was more conscious of detected unreadiness than of shame.

"Gettin' the dust off me," he said, in hurried explanation; "be down in a second." Indeed, in another moment he had resumed his shirt and flannel coat, and swung himself to the floor with a like grace and dexterity, that was to her the revelation of a descending god. She found herself face to face with him, — his features cleansed of dirt and grime, his hair plastered in wet curls on his low forehead. It was a face of cheap adornment, not uncommon in his profession, — unintelligent, unrefined, and even unheroic; but she did not know that. Overcoming a sudden timidity, she nevertheless told him briefly and concisely of the arrival and departure of his pursuers.

His low forehead wrinkled. "Thar's no getting away until they come back," he said without looking at her. "Could ye keep me in here to-night?"

"Yes," she returned simply, as if the idea had already occurred to her; "but you must lie low in the loft."

"And could you" — he hesitated, and went on with a

forced smile — "you see, I've eaten nothing since last night. Could you" —

"I'll bring you something," she said quickly, nodding her head.

"And if you had" — he went on more hesitatingly, glancing down at his travel-torn and frayed garments — "anything like a coat or any other clothing? It would disguise me also, you see, and put 'em off the track."

She nodded her head again rapidly: she had thought of that too; there was a pair of doeskin trousers and a velvet jacket left by a Mexican vaquero who had bought stock from them two years ago. Practical as she was, a sudden conviction that he would look well in the velvet jacket helped her resolve.

"Did they say" — he said, with his forced smile and uneasy glance — "did they — tell you anything about me?"

"Yes," she said abstractedly, gazing at him.

"You see," he began hurriedly, "I'll tell you how it was."

"No, don't!" she said quickly. She meant it. She wanted no facts to stand between her and this single romance of her life. "I must go and get the things," she added, turning away, "before he gets back."

"Who's *he?*" asked the man.

She was about to reply, "My husband," but without knowing why stopped and said, "Mr. Beasley," and then ran off quickly to the house.

She found the vaquero's clothes, took some provisions, filled a flask of whiskey in the cupboard, and ran back with them, her mouth expanded to a vague smile, and pulsating like a schoolgirl. She even repressed with difficulty the ejaculation "There!" as she handed them to him. He thanked her, but with eyes fixed and fascinated by the provisions. She understood it with a new sense of delicacy,

and saying, "I'll come again when he gets back," ran off and returned to the house, leaving him alone to his repast.

Meantime her husband, lounging lazily along the high road, had precipitated the catastrophe he wished to avoid. For his slouching figure, silhouetted against the horizon on that monotonous level, had been the only one detected by the deputy sheriff and the constable, his companion, and they had charged down within fifty yards of him before they discovered their mistake. They were not slow in making this an excuse for abandoning their quest as far as Lowville. In fact, after quitting the distraction of Mrs. Beasley's presence they had, without in the least suspecting the actual truth, become doubtful if the fugitive had proceeded so far. He might at that moment be snugly ensconced behind some low wire-grass ridge, watching their own clearly defined figures, and waiting only for the night to evade them. The Beasley house seemed a proper place of operation in beating up the field. Ira's cold reception of the suggestion was duly disposed of by the deputy. "I have the *right*, ye know," he said, with a grim pleasantry, "to summon ye as my posse to aid and assist me in carrying out the law; but I ain't the man to be rough on my friends, and I reckon it will do jest as well if I 'requisition' your house." The dreadful recollection that the deputy had the power to detail him and the constable to scour the plain while he remained behind in company with Sue stopped Ira's further objections. Yet, if he could only get rid of her while the deputy was in the house, — but then his nearest neighbor was five miles away! There was nothing left for him to do but to return with the men and watch his wife keenly. Strange to say, there was a certain stimulus in this which stirred his monotonous pulses and was not without a vague pleasure. There is a revelation to some natures in newly awakened jealousy that is a reincarnation of love.

As they came into the house a slight circumstance, which an hour ago would have scarcely touched his sluggish sensibilities, now appeared to corroborate his fear. His wife had changed her cuffs and collar, taken off her rough apron, and evidently redressed her hair. This, with the enhanced brightness of her eyes, which he had before noticed, convinced him that it was due to the visit of the deputy. There was no doubt that the official was equally attracted and fascinated by her prettiness, and although her acceptance of his return was certainly not a cordial one, there was a kind of demure restraint and over-consciousness in her manner that might be coquetry. Ira had vaguely observed this quality in other young women, but had never experienced it in his brief courtship. There had been no rivalry, no sexual diplomacy nor insincerity in his capture of the motherless girl who had leaped from the tail-board of her father's wagon almost into his arms, and no man had since come between them. The idea that Sue should care for any other than himself had been simply inconceivable to his placid, matter-of-fact nature. That their sacrament was final he had never doubted. If his two cows, bought with his own money or reared by him, should suddenly have developed an inclination to give milk to a neighbor, he would not have been more astonished. But *they* could have been brought back with a rope, and without a heart throb.

Passion of this kind, which in a less sincere society restricts its expression to innuendo or forced politeness, left the rustic Ira only dumb and lethargic. He moved slowly and abstractedly around the room, accenting his slight lameness more than ever, or dropped helplessly into a chair, where he sat, inanely conscious of the contiguity of his wife and the deputy, and stupidly expectant of — he knew not what. The atmosphere of the little house seemed to him charged with some unwholesome electricity. It kindled his wife's eyes, stimulating the deputy and his follower

to coarse playfulness, enthralled his own limbs to the convulsive tightening of his fingers around the rungs of his chair. Yet he managed to cling to his idea of keeping his wife occupied, and of preventing any eyeshot between her and her guests, or the indulgence of dangerously flippant conversation, by ordering her to bring some refreshment. "What 's gone o' the whiskey bottle?" he said, after fumbling in the cupboard.

Mrs. Beasley did not blench. She only gave her head a slight toss. "Ef you men can't get along with the coffee and flapjacks I 'm going to give ye, made with my own hands, ye kin just toddle right along to the first bar, and order your tangle-foot there. Ef it 's a bar-keeper you 're looking for, and not a lady, say so!"

The novel audacity of this speech, and the fact that it suggested that preoccupation he hoped for, relieved Ira for a moment, while it enchanted the guests as a stroke of coquettish fascination. Mrs. Beasley triumphantly disappeared in the kitchen, slipped off her cuffs and set to work, and in a few moments emerged with a tray bearing the cakes and steaming coffee. As neither she nor her husband ate anything (possibly owing to an equal preoccupation), the guests were obliged to confine their attentions to the repast before them. The sun, too, was already nearing the horizon, and although its nearly level beams acted like a powerful search-light over the stretching plain, twilight would soon put an end to the quest. Yet they lingered. Ira now foresaw a new difficulty: the cows were to be brought up and fodder taken from the barn; to do this he would be obliged to leave his wife and the deputy together. I do not know if Mrs. Beasley divined his perplexity, but she carelessly offered to perform that evening function herself. Ira's heart leaped and sank again as the deputy gallantly proposed to assist her. But here rustic simplicity seemed to be equal to the occasion. "Ef I propose to do Ira's

work," said Mrs. Beasley, with provocative archness, "it 's because I reckon he 'll do more good helpin' you catch your man than you 'll do helpin' *me!* So clear out, both of ye!" A feminine audacity that recalled the deputy to himself, and left him no choice but to accept Ira's aid. I do not know whether Mrs. Beasley felt a pang of conscience as her husband arose gratefully and limped after the deputy; I only know that she stood looking at them from the door, smiling and triumphant.

Then she slipped out of the back door again, and ran swiftly to the barn, fastening on her clean cuffs and collar as she ran. The fugitive was anxiously awaiting her, with a slight touch of brusqueness in his eagerness.

"Thought you were never coming!" he said.

She breathlessly explained, and showed him through the half-opened door the figures of the three men slowly spreading and diverging over the plain, like the nearly level sunrays they were following. The sunlight fell also on her panting bosom, her electrified sandy hair, her red, half-opened mouth, and short and freckled upper lip. The relieved fugitive turned from the three remoter figures to the one beside him, and saw, for the first time, that it was fair. At which he smiled, and her face flushed and was irradiated.

Then they fell to talk, — he grateful, boastful, — as the distant figures grew dim; she quickly assenting, but following his expression rather than his words, with her own girlish face and brightening eyes. But what he said, or how he explained his position, with what speciousness he dwelt upon himself, his wrongs, and his manifold manly virtues, is not necessary for us to know, nor was it, indeed, for her to understand. Enough for her that she felt she had found the one man of all the world, and that she was at that moment protecting him against all the world! He was the unexpected, spontaneous gift to her, the companion her childhood had never known, the lover she had never dreamed

of, even the child of her unsatisfied maternal yearnings. If she could not comprehend all his selfish incoherences, she felt it was her own fault; if she could not follow his ignorant assumptions, she knew it was *she* who was deficient; if she could not translate his coarse speech, it was because it was the language of a larger world from which she had been excluded. To this world belonged the beautiful limbs she gazed on, — a very different world from that which had produced the rheumatic deformities and useless mayhem of her husband, or the provincially foppish garments of the deputy. Sitting in the hay-loft together, where she had mounted for greater security, they forgot themselves in his monologue of cheap vaporing, broken only by her assenting smiles and her half-checked sighs. The sharp spices of the heated pine-shingles over their heads and the fragrance of the clover-scented hay filled the close air around them. The sun was falling with the wind, but they heeded it not; until the usual fateful premonition struck the woman, and saying "I must go now," she only half unconsciously precipitated the end. For, as she rose, he caught first her hand and then her waist, and attempted to raise the face that was suddenly bending down as if seeking to hide itself in the hay. It was a brief struggle, ending in a submission as sudden, and their lips met in a kiss, so eager that it might have been impending for days instead of minutes.

"Oh, Sue! where are ye?"

It was her husband's voice, out of a darkness that they only then realized. The man threw her aside with a roughness that momentarily shocked her above any sense of surprise or shame: *she* would have confronted her husband in his arms, — glorified and translated, — had he but kept her there. Yet she answered, with a quiet, level voice that astonished her lover, "Here! I 'm just coming down!" and walked coolly to the ladder. Looking over,

and seeing her husband with the deputy standing in the barnyard, she quickly returned, put her finger to her lips, made a gesture for her companion to conceal himself in the hay again, and was turning away, when, perhaps shamed by her superior calmness, he grasped her hand tightly and whispered, "Come again to-night, dear; do!" She hesitated, raised her hand suddenly to her lips, and then quickly disengaging it, slipped down the ladder.

"Ye have n't done much work yet as I kin see," said Ira wearily. "Whitey and Red Tip [the cows] are hangin' over the corral, just waitin'."

"The yellow hen we reckoned was lost is sittin' in the hay-loft, and must n't be disturbed," said Mrs. Beasley, with decision; "and ye 'll have to take the hay from the stack to-night. And," with an arch glance at the deputy, "as I don't see that you two have done much either, you 're just in time to help fodder down."

Setting the three men to work with the same bright audacity, the task was soon completed — particularly as the deputy found no opportunity for exclusive dalliance with Mrs. Beasley. She shut the barn door herself, and led the way to the house, learning incidentally that the deputy had abandoned the chase, was to occupy a "shake-down" on the kitchen floor that night with the constable, and depart at daybreak. The gloom of her husband's face had settled into a look of heavy resignation and alternate glances of watchfulness, which only seemed to inspire her with renewed vivacity. But the cooking of supper withdrew her disturbing presence for a time from the room, and gave him some relief. When the meal was ready he sought further surcease from trouble in copious draughts of whiskey, which she produced from a new bottle, and even pressed upon the deputy in mischievous contrition for her previous inhospitality.

"Now I know that it was n't whiskey only ye came for,

I 'll show you that Sue Beasley is no slouch of a bar-keeper either," she said.

Then, rolling her sleeves above her pretty arms, she mixed a cocktail in such delightful imitation of the fashionable bar-keeper's dexterity that her guests were convulsed with admiration. Even Ira was struck with this revelation of a youthfulness that five years of household care had checked, but never yet subdued. He had forgotten that he had married a child. Only once, when she glanced at the cheap clock on the mantel, had he noticed another change, more remarkable still from its very inconsistency with her burst of youthful spirits. It was another face that he saw, — older and matured with an intensity of abstraction that struck a chill to his heart. It was not *his* Sue that was standing there, but another Sue, wrought, as it seemed to his morbid extravagance, by some one else's hand.

Yet there was another interval of relief when his wife, declaring she was tired, and even jocosely confessing to some effect of the liquor she had pretended to taste, went early to bed. The deputy, not finding the gloomy company of the husband to his taste, presently ensconced himself on the floor, before the kitchen fire, in the blankets that she had provided. The constable followed his example. In a few moments the house was silent and sleeping, save for Ira sitting alone, with his head sunk on his chest and his hands gripping the arms of his chair before the dying embers of his hearth.

He was trying, with the alternate quickness and inaction of an inexperienced intellect and an imagination morbidly awakened, to grasp the situation before him. The common sense that had hitherto governed his life told him that the deputy would go to-morrow, and that there was nothing in his wife's conduct to show that her coquetry and aberration would not pass as easily. But it recurred to him that she had never shown this coquetry or aberration to *him* during

their own brief courtship, — that she had never looked or acted like this before. If this was love, she had never known it; if it was only "women's ways," as he had heard men say, and so dangerously attractive, why had she not shown it to him? He remembered that matter-of-fact wedding, the bride without timidity, without blushes, without expectation beyond the transference of her home to his. Would it have been different with another man? — with the deputy, who had called this color and animation to her face? What did it all mean? Were all married people like this? There were the Westons, their neighbors, — was Mrs. Weston like Sue? But he remembered that Mrs. Weston had run away with Mr. Weston from her father's house. It was what they called "a love match." Would Sue have run away with him? Would she now run away with — ?

The candle was guttering as he rose with a fierce start — his first impulse of anger — from the table. He took another gulp of whiskey. It tasted like water; its fire was quenched in the greater heat of his blood. He would go to bed. Here a new and indefinable timidity took possession of him; he remembered the strange look in his wife's face. It seemed suddenly as if the influence of the sleeping stranger in the next room had not only isolated her from him, but would make his presence in her bedroom an intrusion on their hidden secrets. He had to pass the open door of the kitchen. The head of the unconscious deputy was close to Ira's heavy boot. He had only to lift his heel to crush that ruddy, good-looking, complacent face. He hurried past him, up the creaking stairs. His wife lay still on one side of the bed, apparently asleep, her face half-hidden in her loosened, fluffy hair. It was well; for in the vague shyness and restraint that was beginning to take possession of him he felt he could not have spoken to her, or, if he had, it would have been only to voice the horrible, unformulated things that seemed to choke him. He crept softly

to the opposite side of the bed, and began to undress. As he pulled off his boots and stockings, his eye fell upon his bare, malformed feet. This caused him to look at his maimed hand, to rise, drag himself across the floor to the mirror, and gaze upon his lacerated ear. She, this prettily formed woman lying there, must have seen it often; she must have known all these years that he was not like other men, — not like the deputy, with his tight riding-boots, his soft hand, and the diamond that sparkled vulgarly on his fat little finger. A cold sweat broke over him. He drew on his stockings again, lifted the outer counterpane, and, half undressed, crept under it, wrapping its corner around his maimed hand, as if to hide it from the light. Yet he felt that he saw things dimly; there was a moisture on his cheeks and eyelids he could not account for; it must be the whiskey "coming out."

His wife lay very still; she scarcely seemed to breathe. What if she should never breathe again, but die as the old Sue he knew, the lanky girl he had married, unchanged and uncontaminated? It would be better than this. Yet at the same moment the picture was before him of her pretty simulation of the bar-keeper, of her white bared arms and laughing eyes, all so new, so fresh to him! He tried to listen to the slow ticking of the clock, the occasional stirring of air through the house, and the movement, like a deep sigh, which was the regular, inarticulate speech of the lonely plain beyond, and quite distinct from the evening breeze. He had heard it often, but, like so many things he had learned that day, he never seemed to have caught its meaning before. Then, perhaps, it was his supine position, perhaps some cumulative effect of the whiskey he had taken, but all this presently became confused and whirling. Out of its gyrations he tried to grasp something, to hear voices that called him to "wake," and in the midst of it he fell into a profound sleep.

The clock ticked, the wind sighed, the woman at his side lay motionless for many minutes.

Then the deputy on the kitchen floor rolled over with an appalling snort, struggled, stretched himself, and awoke. A healthy animal, he had shaken off the fumes of liquor with a dry tongue and a thirst for water and fresh air. He raised his knees and rubbed his eyes. The water bucket was missing from the corner. Well, he knew where the spring was, and a turn out of the close and stifling kitchen would do him good. He yawned, put on his boots softly, opened the back door, and stepped out. Everything was dark, but above and around him, to the very level of his feet, all apparently pricked with bright stars. The bulk of the barn rose dimly before him on the right, to the left was the spring. He reached it, drank, dipped his head and hands in it, and arose refreshed. The dry, wholesome breath that blew over this flat disk around him, rimmed with stars, did the rest. He began to saunter slowly back, the only reminiscence of his evening's potations being the figure he recalled of his pretty hostess, with bare arms and lifted glasses, imitating the bar-keeper. A complacent smile straightened his yellow mustache. How she kept glancing at him and watching him, the little witch! Ha! no wonder! What could she find in the surly, slinking, stupid brute yonder? (The gentleman here alluded to was his host.) But the deputy had not been without a certain provincial success with the fair. He was true to most men, and fearless to all. One may not be too hard upon him at this moment of his life.

For as he was passing the house he stopped suddenly. Above the dry, dusty, herbal odors of the plain, above the scent of the new-mown hay within the barn, there was distinctly another fragrance, — the smell of a pipe. But where? Was it his host who had risen to take the outer air? Then it suddenly flashed upon him that Beasley did *not* smoke, nor the constable either. The smell seemed to

some from the barn. Had he followed out the train of ideas thus awakened, all might have been well. But at this moment his attention was arrested by a far more startling incident to him, — the draped and hooded figure of Mrs. Sleaper was just emerging from the house. He halted instantly in the shadow and held his breath as she glided quickly across the intervening space and disappeared in the half-opened door of the barn. Did she know he was there? A keen thrill passed over him; his mouth broadened into a breathless smile. It was his last! for as he glided forward to the door the starry heavens broke into a thousand brilliant fragments around him, the earth gave way beneath his feet, and he fell forward with half his skull shot away.

Where he fell there he lay without an outcry, with only one movement, — the curved and grasping fingers of the fighter's hand towards his guarded hip. Where he fell there he lay dead, his face downwards, his good right arm still curved around across his back. Nothing of him moved but his blood, — broadening slowly round him in vivid color, and then sluggishly thickening and darkening until it stopped too, and sank into the earth, a dull brown stain. For an instant the stillness of death followed the echoless report, then there was a quick and feverish rustling within the barn, the hurried opening of a window in the loft, scurrying footsteps, another interval of silence, and then out of the further darkness the sounds of horse-hoofs in the muffled dust of the road. But not a sound or movement in the sleeping house beyond.

The stars at last paled slowly, the horizon lines came back, — a thin streak of opal fire. A solitary bird twittered in the bush beside the spring. Then the back door of the house opened, and the constable came forth, half awakened and apologetic, and with the bewildered haste of

a belated man. His eyes were level, looking for his missing leader as he went on, until at last he stumbled and fell over the now cold and rigid body. He scrambled to his feet again, cast a hurried glance around him, — at the half-opened door of the barn, at the floor littered with trampled hay. In one corner lay the ragged blouse and trousers of the fugitive, which the constable instantly recognized. He went back to the house, and reappeared in a few moments with Ira, white, and stupefied, and hopelessly bewildered; clear only in his statement that his wife had just fainted at the news of the catastrophe, and was equally helpless in her own room. The constable — a man of narrow ideas but quick action — saw it all. The mystery was plain without further evidence. The deputy had been awakened by the prowling of the fugitive around the house in search of a horse. Sallying out, they had met, and Ira's gun, which stood in the kitchen, and which the deputy had seized, had been wrested from him and used with fatal effect at arm's length, and the now double assassin had escaped on the sheriff's horse, which was missing. Turning the body over to the trembling Ira, he saddled his horse and galloped to Lowville for assistance.

These facts were fully established at the hurried inquest which met that day. There was no need to go behind the evidence of the constable, the only companion of the murdered man and first discoverer of the body. The fact that he, on the ground floor, had slept through the struggle and the report, made the obliviousness of the couple in the room above a rational sequence. The dazed Ira was set aside, after half a dozen contemptuous questions; the chivalry of a Californian jury excused the attendance of a frightened and hysterical woman confined to her room. By noon they had departed with the body, and the long afternoon shadows settled over the lonely plain and silent house. At nightfall Ira appeared at the door, and stood for some

moments scanning the plain; he was seen later by two packers, who had glanced furtively at the scene of the late tragedy, sitting outside his doorway, a mere shadow in the darkness; and a mounted patrol later in the night saw a light in the bedroom window where the invalid Mrs. Beasley was confined. But no one saw her afterwards. Later, Ira explained that she had gone to visit a relative until her health was restored. Having few friends and fewer neighbors, she was not missed; and even the constable, the sole surviving guest who had enjoyed her brief eminence of archness and beauty that fatal night, had quite forgotten her in his vengeful quest of the murderer. So that people became accustomed to see this lonely man working in the fields by day, or at nightfall gazing fixedly from his doorway. At the end of three months he was known as the recluse or "hermit" of Bolinas Plain; in the rapid history-making of that epoch it was forgotten that he had ever been anything else.

But Justice, which in those days was apt to nod over the affairs of the average citizen, was keenly awake to offenses against its own officers; and it chanced that the constable, one day walking through the streets of Marysville, recognized the murderer and apprehended him. He was removed to Lowville. Here, probably through some modest doubt of the ability of the County Court, which the constable represented, to deal with purely circumstantial evidence, he was not above dropping a hint to the local Vigilance Committee, who, singularly enough, in spite of his resistance, got possession of the prisoner. It was the rainy season, and business was slack; the citizens of Lowville were thus enabled to give so notorious a case their fullest consideration, and to assist cheerfully at the ultimate hanging of the prisoner, which seemed to be a foregone conclusion.

But herein they were mistaken. For when the constable

had given his evidence, already known to the county, there was a disturbance in the fringe of humanity that lined the walls of the assembly room where the committee was sitting, and the hermit of Bolinas Plain limped painfully into the room. He had evidently walked there: he was soaked with rain and plastered with mud; he was exhausted and inarticulate. But as he staggered to the witness-bench, and elbowed the constable aside, he arrested the attention of every one. A few laughed, but were promptly silenced by the court. It was a reflection upon its only virtue — sincerity.

"Do you know the prisoner?" asked the judge.

Ira Beasley glanced at the pale face of the acrobat, and shook his head.

"Never saw him before," he said faintly.

"Then what are you doing here?" demanded the judge sternly.

Ira collected himself with evident effort, and rose to his halting feet. First he moistened his dry lips, then he said slowly and distinctly, "Because *I* killed the deputy of Bolinas."

With the thrill which ran through the crowded room, and the relief that seemed to come upon him with that utterance, he gained strength and even a certain dignity.

"I killed him," he went on, turning his head slowly around the circle of eager auditors with the rigidity of a wax figure, "because he made love to my wife. I killed him because he wanted to run away with her. I killed him because I found him waiting for her at the door of the barn at the dead o' night, when she 'd got outer bed to jine him. He had n't no gun. He had n't no fight. I killed him in his tracks. That man," pointing to the prisoner, "was n't in it at all." He stopped, loosened his collar, and, baring his rugged throat below his disfigured ear, said: "Now, take me out and hang me!"

"What proof have we of this? Where's your wife? Does she corroborate it?"

A slight tremor ran over him.

"She ran away that night and never came back again. Perhaps," he added slowly, "because she loved him and couldn't bear me; perhaps, as I've sometimes allowed to myself, gentlemen, it was because she didn't want to bear evidence agin me."

In the silence that followed the prisoner was heard speaking to one that was near him. Then he rose. All the audacity and confidence that the husband had lacked were in his voice. Nay, there was even a certain chivalry in his manner which, for the moment, the rascal really believed.

"It's true," he said. "After I stole the horse to get away, I found that woman running wild down the road, cryin' and sobbin'. At first I thought she'd done the shooting. It was a risky thing for me to do, gentlemen; but I took her up on the horse and got her away to Lowville. It was that much dead weight agin my chances, but I took it. She was a woman and—I ain't a dog!"

He was so exalted and sublimated by his fiction that for the first time the jury was impressed in his favor. And when Ira Beasley limped across the room, and, extending his maimed hand to the prisoner, said, "Shake!" there was another dead silence.

It was broken by the voice of the judge addressing the constable.

"What do you know of the deputy's attentions to Mrs. Beasley? Were they enough to justify the husband's jealousy? Did he make love to her?"

The constable hesitated. He was a narrow man, with a crude sense of the principles rather than the methods of justice. He remembered the deputy's admiration; he now remembered, even more strongly, the object of that admiration, simulating with her pretty arms the gestures of the

bar-keeper, and the delight it gave them. He was loyal to his dead leader, but he looked up and down, and then said, slowly and half defiantly: "Well, judge, he was a *man*."

Everybody laughed. That the strongest and most magic of all human passions should always awake levity in any public presentment of or allusion to it was one of the inconsistencies of human nature which even a lynch judge had to admit. He made no attempt to control the tittering of the court, for he felt that the element of tragedy was no longer there. The foreman of the jury arose and whispered to the judge amid another silence. Then the judge spoke: —

"The prisoner and his witness are both discharged. The prisoner to leave the town within twenty-four hours; the witness to be conducted to his own house at the expense of, and with the thanks of, the Committee."

They say that one afternoon, when a low mist of rain had settled over the sodden Bolinas Plain, a haggard, bedraggled, and worn-out woman stepped down from a common "freighting wagon" before the doorway where Beasley still sat; that, coming forward, he caught her in his arms and called her "Sue," and they say that they lived happily together ever afterwards. But they say — and this requires some corroboration — that much of that happiness was due to Mrs. Beasley's keeping forever in her husband's mind her own heroic sacrifice in disappearing as a witness against him, her own forgiveness of his fruitless crime, and the gratitude he owed to the fugitive.

A NIGHT ON THE DIVIDE

With the lulling of the wind towards evening it came on to snow — heavily, in straight, quickly succeeding flakes, dropping like white lances from the sky. This was followed by the usual Sierran phenomenon. The deep gorge, which, as the sun went down, had lapsed into darkness, presently began to reappear. At first the vanished trail came back as a vividly whitening streak before them; then the larches and pines that ascended from it like buttresses against the hillsides glimmered in ghostly distinctness, until at last the two slopes curved out of the darkness as if hewn in marble. For the sudden storm, which extended scarcely two miles, had left no trace upon the steep granite face of the high cliffs above; the snow, slipping silently from them, left them still hidden in the obscurity of night. In the vanished landscape the gorge alone stood out, set in a chaos of cloud and storm through which the moonbeams struggled ineffectually.

It was this unexpected sight which burst upon the occupants of a large covered "station wagon," who had chanced upon the lower end of the gorge. Coming from a still lower altitude, they had known nothing of the storm, which had momentarily ceased, but had left a record of its intensity in nearly two feet of snow. For some moments the horses floundered and struggled on, in what the travelers believed to be some old forgotten drift or avalanche, until the extent and freshness of the fall became apparent. To add to their difficulties, the storm recommenced, and not comprehending its real character and limit, they did not dare to attempt to return the way they came. To go on,

however, was impossible. In this quandary they looked about them in vain for some other exit from the gorge. The sides of that gigantic white furrow terminated in darkness. Hemmed in from the world in all directions, it might have been their tomb.

But although *they* could see nothing beyond their prison walls, they themselves were perfectly visible from the heights above them. And Jack Tenbrook, quartz miner, who was sinking a tunnel in the rocky ledge of shelf above the gorge, stepping out from his cabin at ten o'clock to take a look at the weather before turning in, could observe quite distinctly the outline of the black wagon, the floundering horses, and the crouching figures by their side, scarcely larger than pygmies on the white surface of the snow, six hundred feet below him. Jack had courage and strength, and the good humor that accompanies them, but he contented himself for a few moments with lazily observing the travelers' discomfiture. He had taken in the situation with a glance; he would have helped a brother miner or mountaineer, although he knew that it could only have been drink or bravado that brought *him* into the gorge in a snowstorm, but it was very evident that these were "greenhorns," or Eastern tourists, and it served their stupidity and arrogance right! He remembered also how he, having once helped an Eastern visitor catch the mustang that had "bucked" him, had been called "my man," and presented with five dollars; he recalled how he had once spread the humble resources of his cabin before some straying members of the San Francisco party who were "opening" the new railroad, and heard the audible wonder of a lady that a civilized being could live so "coarsely"! With these recollections in his mind, he managed to survey the distant struggling horses with a fine sense of humor, not unmixed with self-righteousness. There was no real danger in the situation; it meant at the worst a delay and a camping in the snow till

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WITH the lulling of the wind towards evening it came on to snow — heavily, in straight, quickly succeeding flakes, dropping like white lances from the sky. This was followed by the usual Sierran phenomenon. The deep gorge, which, as the sun went down, had lapsed into darkness, presently began to reappear; at first the vanished trail came back as a vividly whitening streak before them; then the larches and pines that ascended from it like buttresses against the hillsides glimmered in ghostly distinctness, until at last the two slopes curved out of the darkness as if hewn in marble. For the sudden storm, which extended scarcely two miles, had left no trace upon the steep granite face of the high cliffs above; the snow, slipping silently from them, left them still hidden in the obscurity of night. In the vanished landscape the gorge alone stood out, set in a chaos of cloud and storm through which the moonbeams struggled ineffectually.

It was this unexpected sight which burst upon the occupants of a large covered "station wagon," who had chanced upon the lower end of the gorge. Coming from a still lower altitude, they had known nothing of the storm, which had momentarily ceased, but had left a record of its intensity in nearly two feet of snow. For some moments the horses floundered and struggled on, in what the travelers believed to be some old forgotten drift or avalanche, until the extent and freshness of the fall became apparent. To add to their difficulties, the storm recommenced, and not comprehending its real character and limit, they did not dare to attempt to return the way they came. To go on,

however, was impossible. In this quandary they looked about them in vain for some other exit from the gorge. The sides of that gigantic white furrow terminated in darkness. Hemmed in from the world in all directions, it might have been their tomb.

But although *they* could see nothing beyond their prison walls, they themselves were perfectly visible from the heights above them. And Jack Tenbrook, quartz miner, who was sinking a tunnel in the rocky ledge of shelf above the gorge, stepping out from his cabin at ten o'clock to take a look at the weather before turning in, could observe quite distinctly the outline of the black wagon, the floundering horses, and the crouching figures by their side, scarcely larger than pygmies on the white surface of the snow, six hundred feet below him. Jack had courage and strength, and the good humor that accompanies them, but he contented himself for a few moments with lazily observing the travelers' discomfiture. He had taken in the situation with a glance; he would have helped a brother miner or mountaineer, although he knew that it could only have been drink or bravado that brought *him* into the gorge in a snowstorm, but it was very evident that these were "greenhorns," or Eastern tourists, and it served their stupidity and arrogance right! He remembered also how he, having once helped an Eastern visitor catch the mustang that had "bucked" him, had been called "my man," and presented with five dollars; he recalled how he had once spread the humble resources of his cabin before some straying members of the San Francisco party who were "opening" the new railroad, and heard the audible wonder of a lady that a civilized being could live so "coarsely"! With these recollections in his mind, he managed to survey the distant struggling horses with a fine sense of humor, not unmixed with self-righteousness. There was no real danger in the situation; it meant at the worst a delay and a camping in the snow till

morning, when he would go down to their assistance. They had a spacious traveling equipage, and were, no doubt, well supplied with furs, robes, and provisions for a several hours' journey; his own pork barrel was quite empty, and his blankets worn. He half smiled, extended his long arms in a decided yawn, and turned back into his cabin to go to bed. Then he cast a final glance around the interior. Everything was all right; his loaded rifle stood against the wall; he had just raked ashes over the embers of his fire to keep it intact till morning. Only one thing slightly troubled him; a grizzly bear, two thirds grown, but only half tamed, which had been given to him by a young lady named "Miggles," when that charming and historic girl had decided to accompany her paralytic lover to the San Francisco hospital, was missing that evening. It had been its regular habit to come to the door every night for some sweet biscuit or sugar before going to its lair in the underbrush behind the cabin. Everybody knew it along the length and breadth of Hemlock Ridge, as well as the fact of its being a legacy from the fair exile. No rifle had ever yet been raised against its lazy bulk or the stupid, small-eyed head and ruff of circling hairs made more erect by its well-worn leather collar. Consoling himself with the thought that the storm had probably delayed its return, Jack took off his coat and threw it on his bunk. But from thinking of the storm his thoughts naturally turned again to the impeded travelers below him, and he half mechanically stepped out in his shirt-sleeves for a final look at them.

But here something occurred that changed his resolution entirely. He had previously noticed only the three foreshortened, crawling figures around the now stationary wagon bulk. They were now apparently making arrangements to camp for the night. But another figure had been added to the group, and as it stood perched upon a wagon seat

laid on the snow Jack could see that its outline was not bifurcated like the others. But even that general suggestion was not needed! the little head, the symmetrical curves visible even at that distance, were quite enough to indicate that it was a woman! The easy smile faded from Jack's face, and was succeeded by a look of concern and then of resignation. He had no choice now; he *must* go! There was a woman there, and that settled it. Yet he had arrived at this conclusion from no sense of gallantry, nor, indeed, of chivalrous transport, but as a matter of simple duty to the sex. He was giving up his sleep, was going down six hundred feet of steep trail to offer his services during the rest of the night, as much as a matter of course as an Eastern man would have offered his seat in an omnibus to a woman, and with as little expectation of return for his courtesy.

Having resumed his coat, with a bottle of whiskey thrust into its pocket, he put on a pair of india-rubber boots reaching to his thighs, and, catching the blanket from his bunk, started with an axe and shovel on his shoulder on his downward journey. When the distance was half completed he shouted to the travelers below; the cry was joyously answered by the three men; he saw the fourth figure, now unmistakably that of a slender, youthful woman, in a cloak, helped back into the wagon, as if deliverance was now sure and immediate. But Jack on arriving speedily dissipated that illusive hope; they could only get through the gorge by taking off the wheels of the wagon, placing the axle on rude sledge-runners of split saplings, which, with their assistance, he would fashion in a couple of hours at his cabin and bring down to the gorge. The only other alternative would be for them to come to his cabin and remain there while he went for assistance to the nearest station, but that would take several hours and necessitate a double journey for the sledge if he was lucky enough

to find one. The party quickly acquiesced in Jack's first suggestion.

"Very well," said Jack, "then there 's no time to be lost; unhitch your horses and we 'll dig a hole in that bank for them to stand in out of the snow." This was speedily done. "Now," continued Jack, "you 'll just follow me up to my cabin; it 's a pretty tough climb, but I 'll want your help to bring down the runners."

Here the man who seemed to be the head of the party — of middle age and a superior, professional type — for the first time hesitated. "I forgot to say that there is a lady with us, — my daughter," he began, glancing towards the wagon.

"I reckoned as much," interrupted Jack simply, "and I allowed to carry her up myself the roughest part of the way. She kin make herself warm and comf'ble in the cabin until we 've got the runners ready."

"You hear what our friend says, Amy?" suggested the gentleman appealingly, to the closed leather curtains of the wagon.

There was a pause. The curtain was suddenly drawn aside, and a charming little head and shoulders, furred to the throat and topped with a bewitching velvet cap, were thrust out. In the obscurity little could be seen of the girl's features, but there was a certain willfulness and impatience in her attitude. Being in the shadow, she had the advantage of the others, particularly of Jack, as his figure was fully revealed in the moonlight against the snowbank. Her eyes rested for a moment on his high boots, his heavy mustache, so long as to mingle with the unkempt locks which fell over his broad shoulders, on his huge red hands streaked with black grease from the wagon wheels, and some blood, stanched with snow, drawn from bruises in cutting out brambles in the brush; on — more awful than all — a monstrous, shiny "specimen" gold ring encircling one of his

fingers, — on the whiskey bottle that shamelessly bulged from his side pocket, and then — slowly dropped her dissatisfied eyelids.

"Why can't I stay *here?*" she said languidly. "It 's quite nice and comfortable."

"Because we can't leave you alone, and we must go with this gentleman to help him."

Miss Amy let the tail of her eye again creep shudderingly over this impossible Jack. "I thought the — the gentleman was going to help *us*," she said dryly.

"Nonsense, Amy, you don't understand," said her father impatiently. "This gentleman is kind enough to offer to make some sledge-runners for us at his cabin, and we must help him."

"But I can stay here while you go. I'm not afraid."

"Yes, but you 're *alone* here, and something might happen."

"Nothing could happen," interrupted Jack quickly and cheerfully. He had flushed at first, but he was now considering that the carrying of a lady as expensively attired and apparently as delicate and particular as this one might be somewhat difficult. "There 's nothin' that would hurt ye here," he continued, addressing the velvet cap and furred throat in the darkness, "and if there was it could n't get at ye, bein', so to speak, in the same sort o' fix as you. So you 're all right," he added positively.

Inconsistently enough, the young lady did not accept this as gratefully as might have been imagined, but Jack did not see the slight flash of her eye as, ignoring him, she replied markedly to her father, "I 'd much rather stop here, papa."

"And," continued Jack, turning also to her father, "you can keep the wagon and the whole gorge in sight from the trail all the way up. So you can see that everything 's all right. Why, I saw *you* from the first." He stopped awk-

wardly, and added, "Come along; the sooner we 're off, the quicker the job 's over."

"Pray don't delay the gentleman and — the job," said Miss Amy sweetly.

Reassured by Jack's last suggestion, her father followed him with the driver and the second man of the party, a youngish and somewhat undistinctive individual, but to whose gallant anxieties Miss Amy responded effusively. Nevertheless, the young lady had especially noted Jack's confession that he had seen them when they first entered the gorge. "And I suppose," she added to herself mentally, "that he sat there with his boozing companions, laughing and jeering at our struggles."

But when the sound of her companions' voices died away, and their figures were swallowed up in the darkness behind the snow, she forgot all this, and much else that was mundane and frivolous, in the impressive and majestic solitude which seemed to descend upon her from the obscurity above. At first it was accompanied with a slight thrill of vague fear, but this passed presently into that profound peace which the mountains alone can give their lonely or perturbed children. It seemed to her that Nature was never the same, on the great plains where men and cities always loomed into such ridiculous proportions, as when the Great Mother raised herself to comfort them with smiling hillsides, or encompassed them and drew them closer in the loving arms of her mountains. The long white *cañada* stretched before her in a purity that did not seem of the earth; the vague bulk of the mountains rose on either side of her in a mystery that was not of this life. Yet it was not oppressive; neither was its restfulness and quiet suggestive of obliviousness and slumber; on the contrary, the highly rarefied air seemed to give additional keenness to her senses; her hearing had become singularly acute; her eyesight pierced the uttermost extremity of the gorge, lit

by the full moon that occasionally shone through slowly drifting clouds. Her nerves thrilled with a delicious sense of freedom and a strange desire to run or climb. It seemed to her, in her exalted fancy, that these solitudes should be peopled only by a kingly race, and not by such gross and material churls as this mountaineer who helped them. And, I grieve to say, — writing of an idealist that *was* and a heroine that *is* to be, — she was getting outrageously hungry.

There were a few biscuits in her traveling-bag, and she remembered that she had been presented with a small jar of California honey at San José. This she took out and opened on the seat before her, and spreading the honey on the biscuits, ate them with a keen schoolgirl relish and a pleasant suggestion of a sylvan picnic in spite of the cold. It was all very strange; quite an experience for her to speak of afterwards. People would hardly believe that she had spent an hour or two, all alone, in a deserted wagon in a mountain snow pass. It was an adventure such as one reads of in the magazines. Only something was lacking which the magazines always supplied, — something heroic, something done by somebody. If that awful-looking mountaineer — that man with the long hair and mustache, and that horrible gold ring, — why such a ring? — was only different! But he was probably gorging beefsteak or venison with her father and Mr. Waterhouse, — men were always such selfish creatures! — and had quite forgotten all about her. It would have been only decent for them to have brought her down something hot; biscuits and honey were certainly cloying, and somehow did n't agree with the temperature. She was really half starved! And much they cared! It would just serve them right if something *did* happen to her, — or *seem* to happen to her, — if only to frighten them. And the pretty face that was turned up in the moonlight wore a charming but decided pout.

Good gracious, what was that? The horses were either struggling or fighting in their snow shelters. Then one with a frightened neigh broke from its halter and dashed into the road, only to be plunged snorting and helpless into the drifts. Then the other followed. How silly! Something had frightened them. Perhaps only a rabbit or a mole; horses were such absurdly nervous creatures! However, it was just as well; somebody would see them or hear them, — that neigh was quite human and awful, — and they would hurry down to see what was the matter. *She* could n't be expected to get out and look after the horses in the snow. Anyhow, she *would n't!* She was a good deal safer where she was; it might have been rats or mice about that frightened them! Goodness!

She was still watching with curious wonder the continued fright of the animals, when suddenly she felt the wagon half bumped, half lifted from behind. It was such a lazy, deliberate movement that for a moment she thought it came from the party, who had returned noiselessly with the runners. She scrambled over to the back seat, unbuttoned the leather curtain, lifted it, but nothing was to be seen. Consequently, with feminine quickness, she said, "I see you perfectly, Mr. Waterhouse — don't be silly!" But at this moment there was another shock to the wagon, and from beneath it arose what at first seemed to her to be an uplifting of the drift itself, but, as the snow was shaken away from its heavy bulk, proved to be the enormous head and shoulders of a bear!

Yet even then she was not *wholly* frightened, for the snout that confronted her had a feeble inoffensiveness; the small eyes were bright with an eager, almost childish curiosity rather than a savage ardor, and the whole attitude of the creature lifted upon its hind legs was circus-like and ludicrous rather than aggressive. She was enabled to say with some dignity, "Go away! Shoo!" and to wave

her luncheon basket at it with exemplary firmness. But here the creature laid one paw on the back seat as if to steady itself, with the singular effect of collapsing the whole side of the wagon, and then opened its mouth as if in some sort of inarticulate reply. But the revelation of its red tongue, its glistening teeth, and, above all, the hot, suggestive fume of its breath, brought the first scream from the lips of Miss Amy. It was real and convincing; the horses joined in it; the three screamed together! The bear hesitated for an instant, then, catching sight of the honey-pot on the front seat, which the shrinking-back of the young girl had disclosed, he slowly reached forward his other paw and attempted to grasp it. This exceedingly simple movement, however, at once doubled up the front seat, sent the honey-pot a dozen feet into the air, and dropped Miss Amy upon her knees in the bed of the wagon. The combined mental and physical shock was too much for her; she instantly and sincerely fainted; the last thing in her ears amidst this wreck of matter being the "wheep" of a bullet and the sharp crack of a rifle.

. . . . . .

She recovered her consciousness in the flickering light of a fire of bark, that played upon the rafters of a roof thatched with bark and upon a floor of strewn and shredded bark. She even suspected she was lying upon a mattress of bark underneath the heavy bearskin she could feel and touch. She had a delicious sense of warmth, and, mingled with this strange spicing of woodland freedom, even a sense of home protection. And surely enough, looking around, she saw her father at her side.

He briefly explained the situation. They had been at first attracted by the cry of the frightened horses and their plunging, which they could see distinctly, although they saw nothing else. "But, Mr. Tenbrook" —

"Mr. Who?" said Amy, staring at the rafters.

"The owner of this cabin — the man who helped us — caught up his gun, and calling us to follow, ran like lightning down the trail. At first we followed blindly, and unknowingly, for we could only see the struggling horses, who, however, seemed to be *alone*, and the wagon from which you did not seem to have stirred. Then, for the first time, my dear child, we suddenly saw your danger. Imagine how we felt as that hideous brute rose up in the road and began attacking the wagon. We called on Tenbrook to fire, but for some inconceivable reason he did not, although he still kept running at the top of his speed. Then we heard you shriek" —

"I did n't shriek, papa; it was the horses."

"My child, I knew your voice."

"Well, it was only a *very little* scream — because I had tumbled." The color was coming back rapidly to her pink cheeks.

"And then, at your scream, Tenbrook fired! — it was a wonderful shot for the distance, so everybody says — and killed the bear, though Tenbrook says it ought n't to. I believe he wanted to capture the creature alive. They 've queer notions, those hunters. And then, as you were unconscious, he brought you up here."

"*Who* brought me?"

"Tenbrook; he 's as strong as a horse. Slung you up on his shoulders like a feather pillow."

"Oh!"

"And then, as the wagon required some repairing from the brute's attack, we concluded to take it leisurely, and let you rest here for a while."

"And where is — where are *they?*"

"At work on the wagon. I determined to stay with you, though you are perfectly safe here."

"I suppose I ought — to thank — this man, papa?"

"Most certainly, though, of course, *I* have already done

so. But he was rather curt in reply. These half-savage men have such singular ideas. He said the beast would never have attacked you except for the honey-pot which it scented. That 's absurd."

"Then it 's all my fault?"

"Nonsense! How could *you* know?"

"And I 've made all this trouble. And frightened the horses. And spoilt the wagon. And made the man run down and bring me up here when he did n't want to!"

"My dear child! Don't be idiotic! Amy! Well, really!"

For the idiotic one was really wiping two large tears from her lovely blue eyes. She subsided into an ominous silence, broken by a single sniffle. "Try to go to sleep, dear; you 've had quite a shock to your nerves," added her father soothingly. She continued silent, but not sleeping.

"I smell coffee."

"Yes, dear."

"You 've been having coffee, papa?"

"We *did* have some, I think," said the wretched man apologetically, though why he could not determine.

"Before I came up? while the bear was trying to eat me?"

"No, after."

"I 've a horrid taste in my mouth. It 's the honey. I 'll never eat honey again. Never!"

"Perhaps it 's the whiskey."

"What?"

"The whiskey. You were quite faint and chilled, you know. We gave you some."

"Out of — that — black — bottle?"

"Yes."

Another silence.

"I 'd like some coffee. I don't think he 'd begrudge me that, if he did save my life."

"I dare say there 's some left." Her father at once bestirred himself and presently brought her some coffee in a tin cup. It was part of Miss Amy's rapid convalescence, or equally of her debilitated condition, that she made no comment on the vessel. She lay for some moments looking curiously around the cabin; she had no doubt it had a worse look in the daylight, but somehow the firelight brought out a wondrous luxury of color in the bark floor and thatching. Besides, it was not "smelly," as she feared it would be; on the contrary, the spicy aroma of the woods was always dominant. She remembered that it was this that always made a greasy, oily picnic tolerable. She raised herself on her elbow, seeing which her father continued confidently, "Perhaps, dear, if you sat up for a few moments you might be strong enough presently to walk down with me to the wagon. It would save time."

Amy instantly lay down again. "I don't know what you can be thinking of, papa. After this shock really I don't feel as if I could *stand* alone, much less *walk*. But, of course," with pathetic resignation, "if you and Mr. Waterhouse supported me, perhaps I might crawl a few steps at a time."

"Nonsense, Amy. Of course, this man Tenbrook will carry you down as he brought you up. Only I thought, — but there are steps, they 're coming now. No! — only *he*."

The sound of crackling in the underbrush was followed by a momentary darkening of the open door of the cabin. It was the tall figure of the mountaineer. But he did not even make the pretense of entering; standing at the door, he delivered his news to the interior generally. It was to the effect that everything was ready, and the two other men were even then harnessing the horses. Then he drew back into the darkness.

"Papa," said Amy, in a sudden frightened voice, "I 've lost my bracelet."

"Have n't you dropped it somewhere there in the bunk?" asked her father.

"No. It 's on the floor of the wagon. I remember now it fell off when I tumbled! And it will be trodden upon and crushed! Could n't you run down, ahead of me, and warn them, papa dear? Mr. Tenbrook will have to go *so* slowly with me." She tumbled out of the bunk with singular alacrity, shook herself and her skirts into instantaneous gracefulness, and fitted the velvet cap on her straying hair. Then she said hurriedly, "Run quick, papa dear, and as you go, call him in and say I am quite ready."

Thus adjured, the obedient parent disappeared in the darkness. With him also disappeared Miss Amy's singular alacrity. Sitting down carefully again on the edge of the bunk, she leaned against the post with a certain indefinable languor that was as touching as it was graceful. I need not tell any feminine readers that there was no dissimulation in all this, — no coquetry, no ostentation, — and that the young girl was perfectly sincere! But the masculine reader might like to know that the simple fact was that, since she had regained consciousness, she had been filled with remorse for her capricious and ungenerous rejection of Tenbrook's proffered service. More than that, she felt she had periled her life in that moment of folly, and that this man — this hero — had saved her. For hero he was, even if he did not fulfill her ideal, — it was only *she* that was not a heroine. Perhaps if he had been more like what she wished she would have felt this less keenly; love leaves little room for the exercise of moral ethics. So Miss Amy Forester, being a good girl at bottom, and not exactly loving this man, felt towards him a frank and tender consideration which a more romantic passion would have shrunk from showing. Consequently, when Tenbrook entered a moment later, he found Amy paler and more thoughtful, but, as he fancied, much prettier than before, looking up at him with eyes of the sincerest solicitude.

Nevertheless, he remained standing near the door, as if indicating a possible intrusion, his face wearing a look of lowering abstraction. It struck her that this might be the effect of his long hair and general uncouthness, and this only spurred her to a fuller recognition of his other qualities.

"I am afraid," she began, with a charming embarrassment, "that instead of resting satisfied with your kindness in carrying me up here, I will have to burden you again with my dreadful weakness, and ask you to carry me down also. But all this seems so little after what you have just done and for which I can never, *never* hope to thank you!" She clasped her two little hands together, holding her gloves between, and brought them down upon her lap in a gesture as prettily helpless as it was unaffected.

"I have done scarcely anything," he said, glancing away towards the fire, "and — your father has thanked me."

"You have saved my life!"

"No! no!" he said quickly. "Not that! You were in no danger, except from my rifle, had I missed."

"I see," she said eagerly, with a little posthumous thrill at having been after all a kind of heroine, "and it was a wonderful shot, for you were so careful not to touch me."

"Please don't say any more," he said, with a slight movement of half awkwardness, half impatience. "It was a rough job, but it 's over now."

He stopped and chafed his red hands abstractedly together. She could see that he had evidently just washed them — and the glaring ring was more in evidence than ever. But the thought gave her an inspiration.

"You 'll at least let me shake hands with you!" she said, extending both her own with childish frankness.

"Hold on, Miss Forester," he said, with sudden desperation. "It ain't the square thing! Look here! I can't play this thing on you! — I can't let you play it on me any longer! You weren't in any danger, — you *never* were!

That bear was only a half-wild thing I helped to r'ar myself! It's taken sugar from my hand night after night at the door of this cabin as it might have taken it from yours here if it was alive now. It slept night after night in the brush, not fifty yards away. The morning's never come yet — till now," he said hastily, to cover an odd break in his voice, "when it didn't brush along the whole side of this cabin to kinder wake me up and say 'So long,' afore it browsed away into the cañon. Thar ain't a man along the whole Divide who didn't know it; thar ain't a man along the whole Divide that would have drawn a bead or pulled a trigger on it till now. It never had an enemy but the bees; it never even knew why horses and cattle were frightened of it. It wasn't much of a pet, you'd say, Miss Forester; it wasn't much to meet a lady's eye; but we of the woods must take our friends where we find 'em and of our own kind. It ain't no fault of yours, Miss, that you didn't know it; it ain't no fault of yours what happened; but when it comes to your *thanking* me for it, why — it's — it's rather rough, you see — and gets me." He stopped short as desperately and as abruptly as he had begun, and stared blankly at the fire.

A wave of pity and shame swept over the young girl and left its high tide on her cheek. But even then it was closely followed by the feminine instinct of defense and defiance. The *real* hero — the *gentleman* — she reasoned bitterly, would have spared her all this knowledge.

"But why," she said, with knitted brows, "why, if you knew it was so precious and so harmless — why did you fire upon it?"

"Because," he said almost fiercely, turning upon her, "because you *screamed*, and *then I knew it had frightened you!*" He stopped instantly as she momentarily recoiled from him, but the very brusqueness of his action had dislodged a tear from his dark eyes that fell warm on the back

of her hand, and seemed to blot out the indignity. "Listen, Miss," he went on hurriedly, as if to cover up his momentary unmanliness. "I knew the bear was missing to-night, and when I heard the horses scurrying about I reckoned what was up. I knew no harm could come to you, for the horses were unharnessed and away from the wagon. I pelted down that trail ahead of them all like grim death, calkilatin' to get there before the bear; they would n't have understood me; I was too high up to call to the creature when he did come out, and I kinder hoped you would n't see him. Even when he turned towards the wagon, I knew it was n't *you* he was after, but suthin' else, and I kinder hoped, Miss, that you, being different and quicker-minded than the rest, would see it too. All the while them folks were yellin' behind me to fire — as if I did n't know my work. I was half-way down — and then you screamed! And then I forgot everything, — everything but standing clear of hitting you, — and I fired. I was that savage that I wanted to believe that he 'd gone mad, and would have touched you, till I got down there and found the honey-pot lying alongside of him. But there, — it 's all over now! I would n't have let on a word to you only I could n't bear to take *your thanks* for it, and I could n't bear to have you thinking me a brute for dodgin' them." He stopped, walked to the fire, and leaned against the chimney under the shallow pretext of kicking the dull embers into a blaze, which, however, had only the effect of revealing his two glistening eyes as he turned back again and came towards her. "Well," he said, with an ineffectual laugh, "it 's all over now, it 's all in the day's work, I reckon, — and now, Miss, if you 're ready, and will just fix yourself your own way so as to ride easy, I 'll carry you down." And slightly bending his strong figure, he dropped on one knee beside her with extended arms.

Now it is one thing to be carried up a hill in temperate,

It's rather rough, you see

unconscious blood and practical business fashion by a tall, powerful man with steadfast, glowering eyes, but quite another thing to be carried down again by the same man, who has been crying, and when you are conscious that you are going to cry too, and your tears may be apt to mingle. So Miss Amy Forester said: "Oh, wait, please! Sit down a moment. Oh, Mr. Tenbrook, I am so very, very sorry," and, clapping her hand to her eyes, burst into tears.

"Oh, please, please don't, Miss Forester," said Jack, sitting down on the end of the bunk with frightened eyes, "please don't do that! It ain't worth it. I 'm only a brute to have said anything."

"No, no! You are *so* noble, *so* forgiving!" sobbed Miss Forester, "and *I* have made you go and kill the only thing you cared for, that was all your own."

"No, Miss, — not all my own, either, — and that makes it so rough. For it was only left in trust with me by a friend. It was her only companion."

"*Her* only companion?" echoed Miss Forester, sharply lifting her bowed head.

"Except," said Jack hurriedly, miscomprehending the emphasis with masculine fatuity, — "except the dying man for whom she lived and sacrificed her whole life. She gave me this ring, to always remind me of my trust. I suppose," he added ruefully, looking down upon it, "it 's no use now. I 'd better take it off."

Then Amy eyed the monstrous object with angelic simplicity. "I certainly should," she said with infinite sweetness; "it would only remind you of your loss. But," she added, with a sudden, swift, imploring look of her blue eyes, "if you could part with it to me, it would be such a reminder and token of — of your forgiveness."

Jack instantly handed it to her. "And now," he said, "let me carry you down."

"I think," she said hesitatingly, "that — I had better try to walk," and she rose to her feet.

"Then I shall know that you have not forgiven me," said Jack sadly.

"But I have no right to trouble" —

Alas! she had no time to finish her polite objection, for the next moment she felt herself lifted in the air, smelled the bark thatch within an inch of her nose, saw the firelight vanish behind her, and subsiding into his curved arms as in a hammock, the two passed forth into the night together.

"I can't find your bracelet anywhere, Amy," said her father, when they reached the wagon.

"It was on the floor in the hut," said Amy reproachfully. "But, of course, you never thought of that!"

. . . . . .

My pen halts with some diffidence between two conclusions to this veracious chronicle. As they agree in result, though not in theory or intention, I may venture to give them both. To one coming from the lips of the charming heroine herself I naturally yield the precedence. "Oh, the bear story! I don't really remember whether that was before I was engaged to John or after. But I had known him for some time; father introduced him at the Governor's ball at Sacramento. Let me see! — I think it was in the winter of '56. Yes! it was very amusing; I always used to charge John with having trained that bear to attack our carriage so that he might come in as a hero! Oh, of course, there are a hundred absurd stories about him, — they used to say that he lived all alone in a cabin like a savage, and all that sort of thing, and was a friend of a dubious woman in the locality, whom the common people made a heroine of, — Miggles, or Wiggles, or some such preposterous name. But look at John there; can you conceive it?" The listener, glancing at a very handsome, clean-shaven fellow, faultlessly attired, could not conceive such an absurdity. So I therefore simply give the opinion of Joshua Bixley, Superintendent of the Long Divide Tun-

nel Company, for what it is worth: "I never took much stock in that bear story, and its captivating old Forester's daughter. Old Forester knew a thing or two, and when he was out here consolidating tunnels, he found out that Jack Tenbrook was about headed for the big lead, and brought him out and introduced him to Amy. You see, Jack, clear grit as he was, was mighty rough style, and about as simple as they make 'em, and they had to get up something to account for that girl's taking a shine to him. But they seem to be happy enough — and what are you going to do about it?"

And I transfer this philosophic query to the reader.

MR. JACK HAMLIN'S MEDIATION

PART I

At nightfall it began to rain. The wind arose too, and also began to buffet a small, struggling, nondescript figure, creeping along the trail over the rocky upland meadow towards Rylands's rancho. At times its head was hidden in what appeared to be wings thrown upward from its shoulders; at times its broad-brimmed hat was cocked jauntily on one side, and again the brim was fixed over the face like a visor. At one moment a drifting misshapen mass of drapery, at the next its vague garments, beaten back hard against the figure, revealed outlines far too delicate for that rude enwrapping. For it was Mrs. Rylands herself, in her husband's hat and her "hired man's" old blue army overcoat, returning from the post-office two miles away. The wind continued its aggression until she reached the front door of her newly plastered farmhouse, and then a heavier blast shook the pines above the low-pitched, shingled roof, and sent a shower of arrowy drops after her like a Parthian parting, as she entered. She threw aside the overcoat and hat, and somewhat inconsistently entered the sitting-room, to walk to the window and look back upon the path she had just traversed. The wind and the rain swept down a slope, half meadow, half clearing, — a mile away, — to a fringe of sycamores. A mile further lay the stage road, where, three hours later, her husband would alight on his return from Sacramento. It would be a long, wet walk for Joshua Rylands, as their only horse had been borrowed by a neighbor.

In that fading light Mrs. Rylands's oval cheek was shining still from the raindrops, but there was something in the expression of her worried face that might have as readily suggested tears. She was strikingly handsome, yet quite as incongruous an ornament to her surroundings as she had been to her outer wrappings a moment ago. Even the clothes she now stood in hinted an inadaptability to the weather — the house — the position she occupied in it. A figured silk dress, spoiled rather than overworn, was still of a quality inconsistent with her evident habits, and the lace-edged petticoat that peeped beneath it was draggled with mud and unaccustomed usage. Her glossy black hair, which had been tossed into curls in some foreign fashion, was now wind-blown into a burlesque of it. This incongruity was still further accented by the appearance of the room she had entered. It was coldly and severely furnished, making the chill of the yet damp white plaster unpleasantly obvious. A black harmonium organ stood in one corner, set out with black and white hymn-books; a trestle-like table contained a large Bible; half a dozen black, horsehair-cushioned chairs stood, geometrically distant, against the walls, from which hung four engravings of "Paradise Lost" in black mourning frames; some dried ferns and autumn leaves stood in a vase on the mantelpiece, as if the chill of the room had prematurely blighted them. The coldly glittering grate below was also decorated with withered sprays, as if an attempt had been made to burn them, but was frustrated through damp. Suddenly recalled to a sense of her wet boots and the new carpet, she hurriedly turned away, crossed the hall into the dining-room, and thence passed into the kitchen. The "hired girl," a large-boned Missourian, a daughter of a neighboring woodman, was peeling potatoes at the table. Mrs. Rylands drew a chair before the kitchen stove, and put her wet feet on the hob

"I'll bet a cooky, Mess Rylands, you've done forgot the vanillar," said the girl, with a certain domestic and confidential familiarity.

Mrs. Rylands started guiltily. She made a miserable feint of looking in her lap and on the table. "I'm afraid I did, Jane, if I did n't bring it in *here*."

"That you did n't," returned Jane. "And I reckon ye forgot that 'ar pepper-sauce for yer husband."

Mrs. Rylands looked up, with piteous contrition. "I really don't know what's the matter with me. I certainly went into the shop, and had it on my list, — and — really" —

Jane evidently knew her mistress, and smiled with superior toleration. "It's kinder bewilderin' goin' in them big shops, and lookin' round them stuffed shelves." The shop at the cross-roads and post-office was 14 × 14, but Jane was nurtured on the plains. "Anyhow," she added good-humoredly, "the expressman is sure to look in as he goes by, and you've time to give him the order."

"But is he *sure* to come?" asked Mrs. Rylands anxiously. "Mr. Rylands will be so put out without his pepper-sauce."

"He 's sure to come ef he knows you 're here. Ye kin always calkilate on that."

"Why?" said Mrs. Rylands abstractedly.

"Why? 'cause he just can't keep his eyes off ye! That's why he comes every day, — 't ain't jest for trade!"

This was quite true, not only of the expressman, but of the butcher and baker, and the "candlestick-maker," had there been so advanced a vocation at the cross-roads. All were equally and curiously attracted by her picturesque novelty. Mrs. Rylands knew this herself, but without vanity or coquettishness. Possibly that was why the other woman told her. She only slightly deepened the lines of discontent in her cheek and said abstractedly, "Well, when he comes, *you* ask him."

She dried her shoes, put on a pair of slippers that had a faded splendor about them, and went up to her bedroom. Here she hesitated for some time between the sewing-machine and her knitting-needles, but finally settled upon the latter, and a pair of socks for her husband which she had begun a year ago. But she presently despaired of finishing them before he returned, three hours hence, and so applied herself to the sewing-machine. For a little while its singing hum was heard between the blasts that shook the house, but the thread presently snapped, and the machine was put aside somewhat impatiently, with a discontented drawing of the lines around her handsome mouth. Then she began to "tidy" the room, putting a great many things away and bringing out a great many more, a process that was necessarily slow, owing to her falling into attitudes of minute inspection of certain articles of dress, with intervals of trying them on, and observing their effect in her mirror. This kind of interruption also occurred while she was putting away some books that were lying about on chairs and tables, stopping midway to open their pages, becoming interested, and quite finishing one chapter, with the book held close against the window to catch the fading light of day. The feminine reader will gather from this that Mrs. Rylands, though charming, was not facile in domestic duties. She had just glanced at the clock, and lit the candle to again set herself to work, and thus bridge over the two hours more of waiting, when there came a tap at the door. She opened it to Jane.

"There 's an entire stranger downstairs, ez hez got a lame hoss and wants to borry a fresh one."

"We have none, you know," said Mrs. Rylands, a little impatiently.

"Thet 's what I told him. Then he wanted to know ef he could lie by here till he could get one or fix up his own hoss."

"As you like; you know if you can manage it," said Mrs. Rylands, a little uneasily. "When Mr. Rylands comes, you can arrange it between you. Where is he now?"

"In the kitchen."

"The kitchen!" echoed Mrs. Rylands.

"Yes, ma'am, I showed him into the parlor, but he kinder shivered his shoulders, and reckoned ez how he 'd go inter the kitchen. Ye see, ma'am, he was all wet, and his shiny big boots was sloppy. But he ain't one o' the stuck-up kind, and he 's willin' to make hisself comf'ble before the kitchen stove."

"Well, then, he don't want *me*," said Mrs. Rylands, with a relieved voice.

"Yes 'm," said Jane, apparently equally relieved. "Only, I thought I 'd just tell you."

A few minutes later, in crossing the upper hall, Mrs. Rylands heard Jane's voice from the kitchen raised in rustic laughter. Had she been satirically inclined, she might have understood Jane's willingness to relieve her mistress of the duty of entertaining the stranger; had she been philosophical, she might have considered the girl's dreary, monotonous life at the rancho, and made allowance for her joy at this rare interruption of it. But I fear that Mrs. Rylands was neither satirical nor philosophical, and presently, when Jane reëntered, with color in her alkaline face, and light in her huckleberry eyes, and said she was going over to the cattle-sheds in the "far pasture," to see if the hired man did n't know of some horse that could be got for the stranger, Mrs. Rylands felt a little bitterness in the thought that the girl would have scarcely volunteered to go all that distance in the rain for *her*. Yet, in a few moments she forgot all about it, and even the presence of her guest in the house, and in one of her fitful, abstracted employments passed through the dining-room into the

kitchen, and had opened the door with an "Oh, Jane!" before she remembered her absence.

The kitchen, lit by a single candle, could be only partly seen by her as she stood with her hand on the lock, although she herself was plainly visible. There was a pause, and then a quiet, self-possessed, yet amused voice answered:

"My name is n't Jane, and if you 're the lady of the house, I reckon yours was n't *always* Rylands."

At the sound of the voice Mrs. Rylands threw the door wide open, and as her eyes fell upon the speaker — her unknown guest — she recoiled with a little cry, and a white, startled face. Yet the stranger was young and handsome, dressed with a scrupulousness and elegance which even the stress of travel had not deranged, and he was looking at her with a smile of recognition, mingled with that careless audacity and self-possession which seemed to be the characteristic of his face.

"Jack Hamlin!" she gasped.

"That 's me, all the time," he responded easily, "and *you 're* Nell Montgomery!"

"How did you know I was here? Who told you?" she said impetuously.

"Nobody! never was so surprised in my life! When you opened that door just now you might have knocked me down with a feather." Yet he spoke lazily, with an amused face, and looked at her without changing his position.

"But you *must* have known *something!* It was no mere accident," she went on vehemently, glancing around the room.

"That 's where you slip up, Nell," said Hamlin imperturbably. "It *was* an accident and a bad one. My horse lamed himself coming down the grade. I sighted the nearest shanty, where I thought I might get another horse. It happened to be this." For the first time he changed his attitude, and leaned back contemplatively in his chair.

She came towards him quickly. "You did n't use to lie, Jack," she said hesitatingly.

"Could n't afford it in my business — and can't now," said Jack cheerfully. "But," he added curiously, as if recognizing something in his companion's agitation, and lifting his brown lashes to her, the window, and the ceiling, "what 's all this about? What 's your little game here?"

"I 'm married," she said, with nervous intensity, — "married, and this is my husband's house!"

"Not married straight out! — regularly fixed?"

"Yes," she said hurriedly.

"One of the boys? Don't remember any Rylands. *Spelter* used to be very sweet on you, — but Spelter might n't have been his real name?"

"None of our lot! No one you ever knew; a — a straight out, square man," she said quickly.

"I say, Nell, look here! You ought to have shown up your cards without even a call. You ought to have told him that you danced at the Casino."

"I did."

"Before he asked you to marry him?"

"Before."

Jack got up from his chair, put his hands in his pockets, and looked at her curiously. This Nell Montgomery, this music-hall "dance and song girl," this girl of whom so much had been *said* and so little *proved!* Well, this was becoming interesting.

"You don't understand," she said, with nervous feverishness; "you remember after that row I had with Jim, that night the manager gave us a supper, — when he treated me like a dog?"

"He did that," interrupted Jack.

"I felt fit for anything," she said, with a half-hysterical laugh, that seemed voiced, however, to check some slumber-

ing memory. "I 'd have cut my throat or his, it did n't matter which" —

"It mattered something to us, Nell," put in Jack again, with polite parenthesis; "don't leave *us* out in the cold."

"I started from 'Frisco that night on the boat ready to fling myself into anything — or the river!" she went on hurriedly. "There was a man in the cabin who noticed me, and began to hang around. I thought he knew who I was, — had seen me on the posters; and as I did n't feel like foolin', I told him so. But he was n't that kind. He said he saw I was in trouble and wanted me to tell him all."

Mr. Hamlin regarded her cheerfully. "And you told him," he said, "how you had once run away from your childhood's happy home to go on the stage! How you always regretted it, and would have gone back but that the doors were shut forever against you! How you longed to leave, but the wicked men and women around you always" —

"I did n't!" she burst out, with sudden passion; "you know I did n't. I told him everything: who I was, what I had done, what I expected to do again. I pointed out the men, — who were sitting there, whispering and grinning at us, as if they were in the front row of the theatre, — and said I knew them all, and they knew me. I never spared myself a thing. I said what people said of me, and did n't even care to say it was n't true!"

"Oh, come!" protested Jack, in perfunctory politeness.

"He said he liked me for telling the truth, and not being ashamed to do it! He said the sin was in the false shame and the hypocrisy; for that 's the sort of man he is, you see, and that 's like him always! He asked if I would marry him — out of hand — and do my best to be his lawful wife. He said he wanted me to think it over and sleep on it, and to-morrow he would come and see me for an

answer. I slipped off the boat at 'Frisco, and went alone to a hotel where I was n't known. In the morning I did n't know whether he 'd keep his word or I 'd keep mine. But he came! He said he 'd marry me that very day, and take me to his farm in Santa Clara. I agreed. I thought it would take me out of everybody's knowledge, and they 'd think me dead! We were married that day, before a regular clergyman. I was married under my own name," — she stopped and looked at Jack, with a hysterical laugh, — "but he made me write underneath it, 'known as Nell Montgomery;' for he said *he* was n't ashamed of it, nor should I be."

"Does he wear long hair and stick straws in it?" said Hamlin gravely. "Does he 'hear voices' and have 'visions'?"

"He 's a shrewd, sensible, hard-working man, — no more mad than you are, nor as mad as *I* was the day I married him. He 's lived up to everything he 's said." She stopped, hesitated in her quick, nervous speech; her lip quivered slightly, but she recalled herself, and looking imploringly, yet hopelessly, at Jack, gasped, "And that 's what 's the matter!"

Jack fixed his eyes keenly upon her. "And you?" he said curtly.

"I?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, what have *you* done?" he said, with sudden sharpness.

The wonder was so apparent in her eyes that his keen glance softened. "Why," she said bewilderingly, "I have been his dog, his slave, — as far as he would let me. I have done everything; I have not been out of the house until he almost drove me out. I have never wanted to go anywhere or see any one; but he has always insisted upon it. I would have been willing to slave here, day and night, and have been happy. But he said I must not seem to

be ashamed of my past, when he is not. I would have worn common homespun clothes and calico frocks, and been glad of it, but he insists upon my wearing my best things, even my theatre things; and as he can't afford to buy more, I wear these things I had. I know they look beastly here, and that I 'm a laughing-stock, and when I go out I wear almost anything to try and hide them; but," her lip quivered dangerously again, "he wants me to do it, and it pleases him."

Jack looked down. After a pause he lifted his lashes towards her draggled skirt, and said in an easier, conversational tone, "Yes! I thought I knew that dress. *I* gave it to you for that walking scene in 'High Life,' did n't I?"

"No," she said quickly, "it was the blue one with silver trimming, — don't you remember? I tried to turn it the first year I was married, but it never looked the same."

"It was sweetly pretty," said Jack encouragingly, "and with that blue hat lined with silver, it was just fetching! Somehow I don't quite remember this one," and he looked at it critically.

"I had it at the races in '58, and that supper Judge Boompointer gave us at 'Frisco where Colonel Fish upset the table trying to get at Jim. Do you know," she said, with a little laugh, "it 's got the stains of the champagne on it yet; it never would come off. See!" and she held the candle with great animation to the breadth of silk before her.

"And there 's more of it on the sleeve," said Jack, "is n't there?"

Mrs. Rylands looked reproachfully at Jack.

"That is n't champagne; don't you know what it is?"

"No!"

"It 's blood," she said gravely; "when that Mexican cut poor Ned so bad, — don't you remember? I held his

head upon my arm while you bandaged him." She heaved a little sigh, and then added, with a faint laugh, "That 's the worst thing about the clothes of a girl in the profession, they get spoiled or stained before they wear out."

This large truth did not seem to impress Mr. Hamlin. "Why did you leave Santa Clara?" he said abruptly, in his previous critical tone.

"Because of the people there. They were standoffish and ugly. You see, Josh" —

"Who?"

"Josh Rylands! — *him!* He told everybody who I was, even those who had never seen me in the bills, — how good I was to marry him, how he had faith in me and was n't ashamed, — until they did n't believe we were married at all. So they looked another way when they met us, and did n't call. And all the while I was glad they did n't, but he would n't believe it, and allowed I was pining on account of it."

"And were you?"

"I swear to God, Jack, I 'd have been content, and more, to have been just there with him, seein' nobody, letting every one believe I was dead and gone, but he said it was wrong, and weak! Maybe it was," she added, with a shy, interrogating look at Jack, of which, however, he took no notice. "Then when he found they would n't call, what do you think he did?"

"Beat you, perhaps," suggested Jack cheerfully.

"He never did a thing to me that was n't straight out, square, and kind," she said, half indignantly, half hopelessly. "He thought if *his* kind of people would n't see me, I might like to see my own sort. So without saying anything to me, he brought down, of all things! Tinkie Clifford, she that used to dance in the cheap variety shows at 'Frisco, and her particular friend, Captain Sykes. It would have just killed you, Jack," she said, with a sudden hysteric burst of

laughter, "to have seen Josh, in his square, straight-out way, trying to be civil and help things along. But," she went on, as suddenly relapsing into her former attitude of worried appeal, "*I* could n't stand it, and when she got to talking free and easy before Josh, and Captain Sykes to guzzling champagne, she and me had a row. She allowed I was putting on airs, and I made her walk, in spite of Josh."

"And Josh seemed to like it," said Hamlin carelessly. "Has he seen her since?"

"No; I reckon he 's cured of asking that kind of company for me. And then we came here. But I persuaded him not to begin by going round telling people who I was, — as he did the last time, — but to leave it to folks to find out if they wanted to, and he gave in. Then he let me fix up this house and furnish it my own way, and I did!"

"Do you mean to say that *you* fixed up that family vault of a sitting-room?" said Jack, in horror.

"Yes, I did n't want any fancy furniture or looking-glasses, and such like, to attract folks, nor anything to look like the old times. I don't think any of the boys would care to come here. And I got rid of a lot of sporting travelers, 'wildcat' managers, and that kind of tramp in this way. But" — She hesitated, and her face fell again.

"But what?" said Jack.

"I don't think that Josh likes it either. He brought home the other day 'My Johnny is a Shoemakiyure,' and wanted me to try it on the organ. But it reminded me how we used to get just sick of singing it on and off the boards, and I could n't touch it. He wanted me to go to the circus that was touring over at the cross-roads, but it was the old Flanigin's circus, you know, the one Gussie Riggs used to ride in, with its old clown and its old ringmaster and the old 'wheezes,' and I chucked it."

"Look here," said Jack, rising and surveying Mrs

Rylands critically. "If you go on at this gait, I'll tell you what that man of yours will do. He'll bolt with some of your old friends!"

She turned a quick, scared face upon him for an instant. But only for an instant. Her hysteric little laugh returned at once, followed by her weary, worried look. "No, Jack, you don't know him! If it was only that! He cares only for me in his own way, — and," she stammered as she went on, "I've no luck in making him happy."

She stopped. The wind shook the house and fired a volley of rain against the windows. She took advantage of it to draw a torn lace-edged handkerchief from her pocket behind, and keeping the tail of her eyes in a frightened fashion on Jack, applied the handkerchief furtively, first to her nose, and then to her eyes.

"Don't do that," said Jack fastidiously, "it's wet enough outside." Nevertheless, he stood up and gazed at her.

"Well," he began.

She timidly drew nearer to him, and took a seat on the kitchen table, looking up wistfully into his eyes.

"Well," resumed Jack argumentatively, "if he won't 'chuck' you, why don't you 'chuck' *him?*"

She turned quite white, and suddenly dropped her eyes. "Yes," she said, almost inaudibly, "lots of girls would do that."

"I don't mean go back to your old life," continued Jack. "I reckon you've had enough of that. But get into some business, you know, like other women. A bonnet shop, or a candy shop for children, see? I'll help start you. I've got a couple of hundred, if not in my own pocket in somebody's else, just burning to be used! And then you can look about you; and perhaps some square business man will turn up and you can marry him. You know you can't live this way, nohow. It's killing you; it ain't fair on you, nor on Rylands either."

"No," she said quickly, "it ain't fair on *him*. I know it, I know it is n't, I know it is n't," she repeated, "only" — She stopped.

"Only what?" said Jack impatiently.

She did not speak. After a pause she picked up the rolling-pin from the table and began absently rolling it down her lap to her knee, as if pressing out the stained silk skirt. "Only," she stammered, slowly rolling the pin handles in her open palms, "I — I can't leave Josh."

"Why can't you?" said Jack quickly.

"Because — because — I," she went on, with a quivering lip, working the rolling-pin heavily down her knee as if she were crushing her answer out of it, — "because — I — love him!"

There was a pause, a dash of rain against the window, and another dash from her eyes upon her hands, the rolling-pin, and the skirts she had gathered up hastily as she cried, "O Jack! Jack! I never loved anybody like him! I never knew what love was! I never knew a man like him before! There never *was* one before!"

To this large, comprehensive, and passionate statement Mr. Jack Hamlin made no reply. An audacity so supreme had conquered his. He walked to the window, looked out upon the dark, rain-filmed pane that, however, reflected no equal change in his own dark eyes, and then returned and walked round the kitchen table. When he was at her back, without looking at her, he reached out his hand, took her passive one that lay on the table in his, grasped it heartily for a single moment, laid it gently down, and returned around the table, where he again confronted her cheerfully face to face.

"You 'll make the riffle yet," he said quietly. "Just now I don't see what *I* could do, or where I could chip in your little game; but if I *do*, or you do, count me in and let me know. You know where to write, — my old address

at Sacramento." He walked to the corner, took up his still wet serape, threw it over his shoulders, and picked up his broad-brimmed riding-hat.

"You 're not going, Jack?" she said hesitatingly, as she rubbed her wet eyes into a consciousness of his movements. "You 'll wait to see *him?* He 'll be here in an hour."

"I 've been here too long already," said Jack. "And the less you say about my calling, even accidentally, the better. Nobody will believe it, — *you* did n't yourself. In fact, unless you see how I can help you, the sooner you consider us all dead and buried, the sooner your luck will change. Tell your girl I 've found my own horse so much better that I have pushed on with him, and give her that."

He threw a gold coin on the table.

"But your horse is still lame," she said wonderingly. "What will you do in this storm?"

"Get into the cover of the next wood and camp out. I 've done it before."

"But, Jack!"

He suddenly made a slight gesture of warning. His quick ear had caught the approach of footsteps along the wet gravel outside. A mischievous light slid into his dark eyes as he coolly moved backward to the door and, holding it open, said, in a remarkably clear and distinct voice: —

"Yes, as you say, society is becoming very mixed and frivolous everywhere, and you 'd scarcely know San Francisco now. So delighted, however, to have made your acquaintance, and regret my business prevents my waiting to see your good husband. So odd that I should have known your Aunt Jemima! But, as you say, the world is very small, after all. I shall tell the Deacon how well you are looking, — in spite of the kitchen smoke in your eyes. Good-by! A thousand thanks for your hospitality."

And Jack, bowing profoundly to the ground, backed out upon Jane, the hired man, and the expressman, treading, I

grieve to say, with some deliberation upon the toes of the two latter, in order, possibly, that in their momentary pain and discomposure they might not scan too closely the face of this ingenious gentleman, as he melted into the night and the storm.

Jane entered, with a slight toss of her head.

"Here 's your expressman, — ef you 're wantin' him *now*."

Mrs. Rylands was too preoccupied to notice her handmaiden's significant emphasis, as she indicated a fresh-looking, bashful young fellow, whose confusion was evidently heightened by the unexpected egress of Mr. Hamlin, and the point-blank presence of the handsome Mrs. Rylands.

"Oh, certainly," said Mrs. Rylands quickly. "So kind of him to oblige us. Give him the order, Jane, please."

She turned to escape from the kitchen and these new intruders, when her eye fell upon the coin left by Mr. Hamlin. "The gentleman wished you to take that for your trouble, Jane," she said hastily, pointing to it, and passed out.

Jane cast a withering look after her retreating skirts, and picking the coin from the table, turned to the hired man. "Run to the stable after that dandified young feller, Dick, and hand that back to him. Ye kin say that Jane Mackinnon don't run arrants fur money, nor play gooseberry to other folks fur fun."

PART II

Mr. Joshua Rylands had, according to the vocabulary of his class, "found grace" at the age of sixteen, while still in the spiritual state of "original sin" and the political one of Missouri. He had not indeed found it by persistent youthful seeking or spiritual insight, but somewhat violently and turbulently at a camp-meeting. A village boy, naturally

gentle and impressible, with an original character, — limited, however, in education and experience, — he had, after his first rustic debauch with some vulgar companions, fallen upon the camp-meeting in reckless audacity; and instead of being handed over to the district constable, was taken in and placed upon "the anxious bench," "rastled with," and exhorted by a strong revivalist preacher, "convicted of sin," and — converted! It is doubtful if the shame of a public arrest and legal punishment would have impressed his youthful spirit as much as did this spiritual examination and trial, in which he himself became accuser. Howbeit, its effect, though punitive, was also exemplary. He at once cast off his evil companions; remaining faithful to his conversion, in spite of their later "backslidings." When, after the Western fashion, the time came for him to forsake his father's farm and seek a new "quarter section" on some more remote frontier, he carried into that secluded, lonely, half-monkish celibacy of pioneer life — which has been the foundation of so much strong Western character — more than the usual religious feeling. At once industrious and adventurous, he lived by "the Word," as he called it, and Nature as he knew it, — tempted by none of the vices or sentiments of civilization. When he finally joined the Californian emigration, it was not as a gold-seeker, but as a discoverer of new agricultural fields; if the hardship was as great and the rewards fewer, he nevertheless knew that he retained his safer isolation and independence of spirit. Vice and civilization were to him synonymous terms; it was the natural condition of the worldly and unregenerate. Such was the man who chanced to meet "Nell Montgomery, the Pearl of the Variety Stage," on the Sacramento boat, in one of his forced visits to civilization. Without knowing her in her profession, her frank exposition of herself did not startle him; he recognized it, accepted it, and strove to convert it. And as long as this daughter of Folly forsook her

evil ways for him, it was a triumph in which there was no shame, and might be proclaimed from the housetop. When his neighbors thought differently, and avoided them, he saw no inconsistency in bringing his wife's old friends to divert her: she might in time convert *them*. He had no more fear of her returning to their ways than he had of himself "backsliding." Narrow as was his creed, he had none of the harshness nor pessimism of the bigot. With the keenest self-scrutiny, his credulity regarding others was touching.

The storm was still raging when he alighted that evening from the up coach at the trail nearest his house. Although encumbered with a heavy carpet-bag, he started resignedly on his two-mile tramp without begrudging the neighborly act of his wife which had deprived him of his horse. It was "like her" to do these things in her good-humored abstraction, an abstraction, however, that sometimes worried him, from the fear that it indicated some unhappiness with her present lot. He was longing to rejoin her after his absence of three days, the longest time they had been separated since their marriage, and he hurried on with a certain lover-like excitement, quite new to his usually calm and temperate blood.

Struggling with the storm and darkness, but always with the happy consciousness of drawing nearer to her in that struggle, he labored on, finding his perilous way over the indistinguishable trail by certain landmarks in the distance, visible only to his pioneer eye. That heavier shadow to the right was not the hillside, but the *slope* to the distant hill; that low, regular line immediately before him was not a fence or wall, but the line of distant gigantic woods, a mile from his home. Yet as he began to descend the slope towards the wood, he stopped and rubbed his eyes. There was distinctly a light in it. His first idea was that he had lost the trail and was nearing the woodman Mackinnon's cabin. But a more careful scrutiny revealed to

him that it was really the wood, and the light was a camp-fire. It was a rough night for camping out, but they were probably some belated prospectors.

When he had reached the fringe of woodland, he could see quite plainly that the fire was built beside one of the large pines, and that the little encampment, which looked quite comfortable and secluded from the storm-beaten trail, was occupied apparently by a single figure. By the good glow of the leaping fire, that figure standing erect before it, elegantly shaped, in the graceful folds of a serape, looked singularly romantic and picturesque, and reminded Joshua Rylands — whose ideas of art were purely reminiscent of boyish reading — of some picture in a novel. The heavy black columns of the pines, glancing out of the concave shadow, also seemed a fitting background to what might have been a scene in a play. So strongly was he impressed by it that but for his anxiety to reach his home, still a mile distant, and the fact that he was already late, he would have penetrated the wood and the seclusion of the stranger with an offer of hospitality for the night. The man, however, was evidently capable of taking care of himself, and the outline of a tethered horse was faintly visible under another tree. It might be a surveyor or engineer, — the only men of a better class who were itinerant.

But another and even greater surprise greeted him as he toiled up the rocky slope towards his farmhouse. The windows of the sitting-room, which were usually blank and black by night, were glittering with unfamiliar light. Like most farmers, he seldom used the room except for formal company, his wife usually avoiding it, and even he himself now preferred the dining-room or the kitchen. His first suggestion that his wife had visitors gave him a sense of pleasure on her account, mingled, however, with a slight uneasiness of his own which he could not account for. More than that, as he approached nearer he could hear the

swell of the organ above the roar of the swaying pines, and the cadences were not of a devotional character. He hesitated for a moment, as he had hesitated at the fire in the woods; yet it was surely his own house! He hurried to the door, opened it; not only the light of the sitting-room streamed into the hall, but the ruddier glow of an actual fire in the disused grate! The familiar dark furniture had been rearranged to catch some of the glow and relieve its sombreness. And his wife, rising from the music-stool, was the room's only occupant!

Mrs. Rylands gazed anxiously and timidly at her husband's astonished face, as he threw off his waterproof and laid down his carpet-bag. Her own face was a little flurried with excitement, and his, half hidden in his tawny beard, and, possibly owing to his self-introspective nature, never spontaneously sympathetic, still expressed only wonder! Mrs. Rylands was a little frightened. It is sometimes dangerous to meddle with a man's habits, even when he has grown weary of them.

"I thought," she began hesitatingly, "that it would be more cheerful for you in here, this stormy evening. I thought you might like to put your wet things to dry in the kitchen, and we could sit here together, after supper, alone."

I am afraid that Mrs. Rylands did not offer all her thoughts. Ever since Mr. Hamlin's departure she had been uneasy and excited, sometimes falling into fits of dejection, and again lighting up into hysterical levity; at other times carefully examining her wardrobe, and then with a sudden impulse rushing downstairs again to give orders for her husband's supper, and to make the extraordinary changes in the sitting-room already noted. Only a few moments before he arrived, she had covertly brought down a piece of music, and put aside the hymn-books, and taken, with a little laugh, a pack of cards from her pocket.

which she placed behind the already dismantled vase on the chimney.

"I reckoned you had company, Ellen," he said gravely, kissing her.

"No," she said quickly. "That is," she stopped with a sudden surge of color in her face that startled her, "there was — a man — here, in the kitchen — who had a lame horse, and who wanted to get a fresh one. But he went away an hour ago. And he was n't in this room — at least, after it was fixed up. So I 've had no company."

She felt herself again blushing at having blushed, and a little terrified. There was no reason for it. But for Jack's warning, she would have been quite ready to tell her husband all. She had never blushed before him over her past life; why she should now blush over seeing Jack, of all people! made her utter a little hysterical laugh. I am afraid that this experienced little woman took it for granted that her husband knew that if Jack or any man had been there as a clandestine lover, she would not have blushed at all. Yet with all her experience, she did not know that she had blushed simply because it was *to* Jack that she had confessed that she loved the man before her. Her husband noted the blush as part of her general excitement. He permitted her to drag him into the room and seat him before the hearth, where she sank down on one knee to pull off his heavy rubber boots. But he waved her aside at this, pulled them off with his own hands, and let her take them to the kitchen and bring back his slippers. By this time a smile had lighted up his hard face. The room was certainly more comfortable and cheerful. Still he was a little worried; was there not in these changes a falling away from the grace of self-abnegation which she had so sedulously practiced?

When supper was served by Jane, in the dull dining-room, Mr. Rylands, had he not been more engaged in these

late domestic changes, might have noticed that the Missouri girl waited upon him with a certain commiserating air that was remarkable by its contrast with the frigid ceremonious politeness with which she attended her mistress. It had not escaped Mrs. Rylands, however, who ever since Jack's abrupt departure had noticed this change in the girl's demeanor to herself, and with a woman's intuitive insight of another woman, had fathomed it. The comfortable *tête-à-tête* with Jack, which Jane had looked forward to, Mrs. Rylands had anticipated herself, and then sent him off! When Joshua thanked his wife for remembering the pepper-sauce, and Mrs. Rylands pathetically admitted her forgetfulness, the head-toss which Jane gave as she left the room was too marked to be overlooked by him. Mrs. Rylands gave a hysterical little laugh. "I am afraid Jane does n't like my sending away the expressman just after I had also dismissed the stranger whom she had taken a fancy to, and left her without company," she said unwisely.

Mr. Rylands did not laugh. "I reckon," he returned slowly, "that Jane must feel kinder lonely; she bears all the burden of our bein' outer the world, without any of our glory in the cause of it."

Nevertheless when supper was over, and the pair were seated in the sitting-room before the fire, this episode was forgotten. Mrs. Rylands produced her husband's pipe and tobacco-pouch. He looked around the formal walls and hesitated. He had been in the habit of smoking in the kitchen.

"Why not here?" said Mrs. Rylands, with a sudden little note of decision. "Why should we keep this room only for company that don't come? I call it silly."

This struck Mr. Rylands as logical. Besides, undoubtedly the fire had mellowed the room. After a puff or two he looked at his wife musingly. "Could n't you make

yourself one of them cigarettys, as they call 'em? Here 's the tobacco, and I 'll get you the paper."

"I *could*," she said tentatively. Then suddenly, "What made you think of it? You never saw *me* smoke!"

"No," said Rylands, "but that lady, your old friend, Miss Clifford, does, and I thought *you* might be hankering after it."

"How do you know Tinkie Clifford smokes?" said Mrs. Rylands quickly.

"She lit a cigaretty that day she called."

"I hate it," said Mrs. Rylands shortly.

Mr. Rylands nodded approval, and puffed meditatively.

"Josh, have you seen that girl since?"

"No," said Joshua.

"Nor any other girl like her?"

"No," said Joshua wonderingly. "You see I only got to know her on your account, Ellen, that she might see you."

"Well, don't you do it any more! None of 'em! Promise me!" She leaned forward eagerly in her chair.

"But, Ellen," — her husband began gravely.

"I know what you 're going to say, but they can't do me any good, and you can't do them any good as you did *me*, so there!"

Mr. Rylands was silent, and smiled meditatively.

"Josh!"

"Yes."

"When you met me that night on the Sacramento boat, and looked at me, did you — did I," she hesitated, — "did you look at me because I had been crying?"

"I thought you were troubled in spirit, and looked so."

"I suppose I looked worried, of course; I had no time to change or even fix my hair; I had on that green dress, and it *never* was becoming. And you only spoke to me on account of my awful looks?"

"I saw only your wrestling soul, Ellen, and I thought you needed comfort and help."

She was silent for a moment, and then, leaning forward, picked up the poker and began to thrust it absently between the bars.

"And if it had been some other girl crying and looking awful, you 'd have spoken to her all the same?"

This was a new idea to Mr. Rylands, but with most men logic is supreme. "I suppose I would," he said slowly.

"And married her?" She rattled the bars of the grate with the poker as if to drown the inevitable reply.

Mr. Rylands loved the woman before him, but it pleased him to think that he loved truth better. "If it had been necessary to her salvation, yes," he said.

"Not Tinkie?" she said suddenly.

"*She* never would have been in your contrite condition."

"Much you know! Girls like that can cry as well as laugh, just as they want to. Well! I suppose I *did* look horrid." Nevertheless, she seemed to gain some gratification from her husband's reply, and changed the subject as if fearful of losing that satisfaction by further questioning.

"I tried some of those songs you brought, but I don't think they go well with the harmonium," she said, pointing to some music on its rack, "except one. Just listen." She rose, and with the same nervous quickness she had shown before, went to the instrument and began to sing and play. There was a hopeless incongruity between the character of the instrument and the spirit of the song. Mrs. Rylands's voice was rather forced and crudely trained, but Joshua Rylands, sitting there comfortably slippered by the fire and conscious of the sheeted rain against the window, felt it good. Presently he arose, and lounging heavily over to the fair performer, leaned down and imprinted a

kiss on the labyrinthine fringes of her hair. At which Mrs. Rylands caught blindly at his hand nearest her, and without lifting her other hand from the keys, or her eyes from the music, said tentatively: —

"You know there 's a chorus just here! Why can't you try it with me?"

Mr. Rylands hesitated a moment, then, with a preliminary cough, lifted a voice as crude as hers, but powerful through much camp-meeting exercise, and roared a chorus which was remarkable chiefly for requiring that archness and playfulness in execution which he lacked. As the whole house seemed to dilate with the sound, and the wind outside to withhold its fury, Mr. Rylands felt that physical delight which children feel in personal outcry, and was grateful to his wife for the opportunity. Laying his hand affectionately on her shoulder, he noticed for the first time that she was in a kind of evening-dress, and that her delicate white shoulder shone through the black lace that enveloped it.

For an instant Mr. Rylands was shocked at this unwonted exposure. He had never seen his wife in evening-dress before. It was true they were alone, and in their own sitting-room, but the room was still invested with that formality and publicity which seemed to accent this indiscretion. The simple-minded frontier man's mind went back to Jane, to the hired man, to the expressman, the stranger, all of whom might have noticed it also.

"You have a new dress," he said slowly, "have you worn it all day?"

"No," she said, with a timid smile. "I only put it on just before you came. It 's the one I used to wear in the ball-room scene in 'Gay Times in 'Frisco.' You don't know it, I know. I thought I would wear it to-night, and then," she suddenly grasped his hand, "you 'll let me put all these things away forever! Won't you, Josh? I 've

seen such nice pretty calico at the store to-day, and I can make up one or two home dresses, like Jane's, only better fitting, of course. In fact, I asked them to send the roll up here to-morrow for you to see."

Mr. Rylands felt relieved. Perhaps his views had changed about the moral effect of her retaining these symbols of her past, for he consented to the calico dresses, not, however, without an inward suspicion that she would not look so well in them, and that the one she had on was more becoming.

Meantime she tried another piece of music. It was equally incongruous and slightly Bacchantic.

"There used to be a mighty pretty dance went to that," she said, nodding her head in time with the music, and assisting the heavily spasmodic attempts of the instrument with the pleasant levity of her voice. "I used to do it."

"Ye might try it now, Ellen," suggested her husband, with a half-frightened, half-amused tolerance.

"*You* play, then," said Mrs. Rylands quickly, offering her seat to him.

Mr. Rylands sat down to the harmonium, as Mrs. Rylands briskly moved the table and chairs against the wall. Mr. Rylands played slowly and strenuously, as from a conscientious regard of the instrument. Mrs. Rylands stood in the centre of the floor, making a rather pretty, animated picture, as she again stimulated the heavy harmonium swell not only with her voice but her hands and feet. Presently she began to skip.

I should warn the reader here that this was before the "shawl" or "skirt" dancing was in vogue, and I am afraid that pretty Mrs. Rylands's performances would now be voted slow. Her silk skirt and frilled petticoat were lifted just over her small ankles and tiny bronze-kid shoes. In the course of a *pirouette* or two, there was a slight further revelation of blue silk stockings and some delicate

embroidery, but really nothing more than may be seen in the sweep of a modern waltz. Suddenly the music ceased. Mr. Rylands had left the harmonium and walked over to the hearth. Mrs. Rylands stopped, and came towards him with a flushed, anxious face.

"It don't seem to go right, does it?" she said, with her nervous laugh. "I suppose I'm getting too old now, and I don't quite remember it."

"Better forget it altogether," he replied gravely. He stopped at seeing a singular change in her face, and added awkwardly, "When I told you I did n't want you to be ashamed of your past, nor to try to forget what you were, I did n't mean such things as that!"

"What did you mean?" she said timidly.

The truth was that Mr. Rylands did not know. He had known this sort of thing only in the abstract. He had never had the least acquaintance with the class to which his wife had belonged, nor known anything of their methods. It was a revelation to him now, in the woman he loved, and who was his wife. He was not shocked so much as he was frightened.

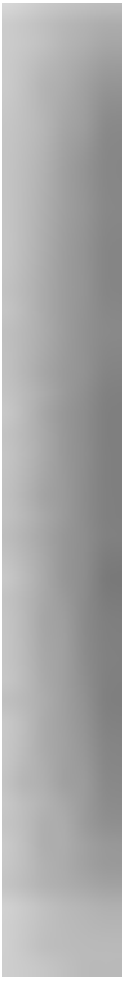
"You shall have the dress to-morrow, Ellen," he said gently, "and you can put away these gewgaws. You don't need to look like Tinkie Clifford."

He did not see the look of triumph that lit up her eye, but added, "Go on and play."

She sat down obediently to the instrument. He watched her for a few moments from the toe of her kid slipper on the pedals to the swell of her shoulders above the keyboard, with a strange, abstracted face. Presently she stopped and came over to him.

"And when I've got these nice calico frocks, and you can't tell me from Jane, and I'm a good housekeeper, and settle down to be a farmer's wife, maybe I'll have a secret to tell you."

She began to skip



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"A secret?" he repeated gravely. "Why not now?"

Her face was quite aglow with excitement and a certain timid mischief as she laughed: "Not while you are so solemn. It can wait."

He looked at his watch. "I must give some orders to Jim about the stock before he turns in," he said.

"He 's gone to the stables already," said Mrs. Rylands.

"No matter; I can go there and find him."

"Shall I bring your boots?" she said quickly.

"I 'll put them on when I pass through the kitchen. I won't be long away. Now go to bed. You are looking tired," he said gently, as he gazed at the drawn lines about her eyes and mouth. Her former pretty color struck him also as having changed of late, and as being irregular and inharmonious.

As Mrs. Rylands obediently ascended the stairs she heaved a faint sigh, her only recognition of her husband's criticism. He turned and passed quickly into the kitchen. He wanted to be alone to collect his thoughts. But he was surprised to find Jane still there, sitting bolt upright in a chair in the corner. Apparently she had been expecting him, for as he entered she stood up, and wiped her cheek and mouth with one hand, as if to compress her lips the more tightly.

"I reckoned," she began, "that unless you war for forgettin' everythin' in these yer goings on, ye 'd be passin' through here to tend to your stock. I 've got a word to say to ye, Mr. Rylands. When I first kem over here to help, I got word from the folks around that your wife afore you married her was just one o' them bally dancers. Well, that was *your* lookout, not mine! Jane Mackinnon ain't the kind to take everybody's sayin' as gospil, but she calkilates to treat folks ez she finds 'em. When she finds 'em lyin' and deceivin'; when she finds 'em purtendin' one thing and doin' another; when she finds 'em makin' fools

tumble to 'em; playing *soots* on their own husbands, and turnin' an honest house into a music-hall and a fandango shop, she kicks! You hear me! Jane Mackinnon kicks!"

"What do you mean?" said Mr. Rylands sternly.

"I mean," said Miss Mackinnon, striking her hips with the back of her hands smartly, and accenting each word that dropped like a bullet from her mouth with an additional blow, — "I — mean — that — your — wife — had — one — of — her — old — hangers-on — from — 'Frisco — here — in — this — very — kitchen — all — the — arternoon; there! I mean that whiles she was waitin' here for you, she was canoodlin' and cryin' over old times with him! I saw her myself through the winder. That 's what I mean, Mr. Joshua Rylands."

"It 's false! She had some poor stranger here with a lame horse. She told me so herself."

Jane Mackinnon laughed shrilly.

"Did she tell you that the poor stranger was young and pretty-faced, with black moustarches? that his store clothes must have cost a fortin, saying nothing of his gold-lined, broadcloth sarrapper? Did she say that his horse was *so* lame that when I went to get another he would n't *wait* for it? Did she tell you *who* he was?"

"No, she did not know," said Rylands sternly, but with a whitening face.

"Well, I 'll tell you! The gambler, the shooter! — the man whose name is black enough to stain any woman he knows. Jim recognized him like a shot; he sez, the moment he clapped eyes on him at the door, 'Dod blasted, if it ain't Jack Hamlin!'"

Little as Mr. Rylands knew of the world, he had heard that name. But it was not *that* he was thinking of. He was thinking of the camp-fire in the wood, the handsome figure before it, the tethered horse. He was thinking of the lighted sitting-room, the fire, his wife's bare shoulders,

her slippers, stockings, and the dance. He saw it all, — a lightning-flash to his dull imagination. The room seemed to expand and then grow smaller, the figure of Jane to sway backwards and forwards before him. He murmured the name of God with lips that were voiceless, caught at the kitchen table to steady himself, held it till he felt his arms grow rigid, and then recovered himself, — white, cold, and sane.

"Speak a word of this to *her*," he said deliberately, "enter her room while I 'm gone, even leave the kitchen before I come back, and I 'll throw you into the road. Tell that hired man, if he dares to breathe it to a soul I 'll strangle him."

The unlooked-for rage of this quiet, God-fearing man, and dupe, as she believed, was terrible, but convincing. She shrank back into the corner as he coolly drew on his boots and waterproof, and without another word left the house.

He knew what he was going to do as well as if it had been ordained for him. He knew he would find the young man in the wood; for whatever were the truth of the other stories, he and the visitor were identical; he had seen him with his own eyes. He would confront him face to face and know all; and until then, he could not see his wife again. He walked on rapidly, but without feverishness or mental confusion. He saw his duty plainly, — if Ellen had "backslidden," he must give her another trial. These were his articles of faith. He should not put her away; but she should nevermore be wife to him. It was *he* who had tempted her, it was true; perhaps God would forgive her for that reason, but *he* could never love her again.

The fury of the storm had somewhat abated as he reached the wood. The fire was still there, but no longer a leaping flame. A dull glow in the darkness of the forest aisles was all that indicated its position. Rylands at once plunged in

that direction; he was near enough to see the red embers when he heard a sharp click, and a voice called: —

"Hold up!"

Mr. Hamlin was a light sleeper. The crackle of underbrush had been enough to disturb him. The voice was his; the click was the cocking of his revolver.

Rylands was no coward, but halted diplomatically.

"Now, then," said Mr. Hamlin's voice, "a little more this way, *in the light*, if you please!"

Rylands moved as directed, and saw Mr. Hamlin lying before the fire, resting easily on one hand, with his revolver in the other.

"Thank you!" said Jack. "Excuse my precautions, but it is night, and this is, for the present, my bedroom."

"My name is Rylands; you called at my house this afternoon and saw my wife," said Rylands slowly.

"I did," said Hamlin. "It was mighty kind of you to return my call so soon, but I did n't expect it."

"I reckon not. But I know who you are, and that you are an old associate of hers, in the days of her sin and unregeneration. I want you to answer me, before God and man, what was your purpose in coming there to-day?"

"Look here! I don't think it 's necessary to drag in strangers to hear my answer," said Jack, lying down again, "but I came to borrow a horse."

"Is that the truth?"

Jack got upon his feet very solemnly, put on his hat, drew down his waistcoat, and approached Mr. Rylands with his hands in his pockets.

"Mr. Rylands," he said, with great suavity of manner, "this is the second time to-day that I have had the honor of having my word doubted by your family. Your wife was good enough to question my assertion that I did n't know that she was living here, but that was a woman's vanity. You have no such excuse. There is my horse yonder, lame,

as you may see. I did n't lame him for the sake of seeing your wife nor you."

There was that in Mr. Hamlin's audacity and perfect self-possession which, even while it irritated, never suggested deceit. He was too reckless of consequence to lie. Mr. Rylands was staggered and half convinced. Nevertheless, he hesitated.

"Dare you tell me everything that happened between my wife and you?"

"Dare you listen?" said Mr. Hamlin quietly.

Mr. Rylands turned a little white. After a moment he said: —

"Yes."

"Good!" said Mr. Hamlin. "I like your grit, though I don't mind telling you it 's the *only* thing I like about you. Sit down. Well, I have n't seen Nell Montgomery for three years until I met her as your wife, at your house. She was surprised as I was, and frightened as I was n't. She spent the whole interview in telling me the history of her marriage and her life with you, and nothing more. I cannot say that it was remarkably entertaining, or that she was as amusing as your wife as she was as Nell Montgomery, the variety actress. When she had finished, I came away."

Mr. Rylands, who had seated himself, made a movement as if to rise. But Mr. Hamlin laid his hand on his knee.

"I asked you if you dared to listen. I have something myself to say of that interview. I found your wife wearing the old dresses that other men had given her, and she said she wore them because she thought it pleased you. I found that you, who are questioning my calling upon her, had already got the worst of her old chums to visit her without asking her consent; I found that instead of being the first one to lie for her and hide her, you were the first one to tell anybody her history, just because you thought it was to the

glory of God generally, and of Joshua Rylands in particular."

"A man's motives are his own," stammered Rylands.

"Sorry you did n't see it when you questioned mine just now," said Jack coolly.

"Then she complained to you?" said Rylands hesitatingly.

"I did n't say that," said Jack shortly.

"But you found her unhappy?"

"Damnably."

"And you advised her" — said Rylands tentatively.

"I advised her to chuck you and try to get a better husband." He paused, and then added, with a disgusted laugh, "but she did n't tumble to it, for a d—d silly reason."

"What reason?" said Rylands hurriedly.

"Said she *loved* you," returned Jack, kicking a brand back into the fire. Mr. Rylands's white cheeks flamed out suddenly like the brand. Seeing which, Jack turned upon him deliberately.

"Mr. Joshua Rylands, I 've seen many fools in my time. I 've seen men holding four aces backed down because they thought they *knew* the other man had a royal flush! I 've seen a man sell his claim for a wildcat share, with the gold lying a foot below him in the ground he walked on. I 've seen a dead shot shoot wild because he *thought* he saw something in the other man's eye. I 've seen a heap of God-forsaken fools, but I never saw one before who claimed God as a pal. You 've got a wife a d—d sight truer to you for what you call her 'sin,' than you 've ever been to her, with all your d—d salvation! And as you could n't make her otherwise, though you 've tried to hard enough, it seems to me that for square downright chuckle-headedness, you can take the cake! Good-night! Now, run away and play! You 're making me tired."

"One moment," said Mr. Rylands awkwardly and hur-

riedly. "I may have wronged you; I was mistaken. Won't you come back with me and accept my — our — hospitality?"

"Not much," said Jack. "I left your house because I thought it better for you and her that no one should know of my being there."

"But you were already recognized," said Mr. Rylands. "It was Jane who lied about you, and your return with me will confute her slanders."

"Who?" asked Jack.

"Jane, our hired girl."

Mr. Hamlin uttered an indescribable laugh.

"That's just as well! You simply tell Jane you *saw* me; that I was greatly shocked at what she said, but that I forgive her. I don't think she'll say any more."

Strange to add, Mr. Hamlin's surmise was correct. Mr. Rylands found Jane still in the kitchen alone, terrified, remorseful, yet ever after silent on the subject. Stranger still, the hired man became equally uncommunicative. Mrs. Rylands, attributing her husband's absence only to care of the stock, had gone to bed in a feverish condition, and Mr. Rylands did not deem it prudent to tell her of his interview. The next day she sent for the doctor, and it was deemed necessary for her to keep her bed for a few days. Her husband was singularly attentive and considerate during that time, and it was probable that Mrs. Rylands seized that opportunity to tell him the secret she spoke of the night before. Whatever it was, — for it was not generally known for a few months later, — it seemed to draw them closer together, imparted a protecting dignity to Joshua Rylands, which took the place of his former selfish austerity, gave them a future to talk of confidentially, hopefully, and sometimes foolishly, which took the place of their more foolish past, and when the roll of calico came from the cross-roads, it

contained also a quantity of fine linen, laces, small caps, and other trifles, somewhat in contrast to the more homely materials ordered.

And when three months were past, the sitting-room was often lit up and made cheerful, particularly on that supreme occasion when, with a great deal of enthusiasm, all the women of the countryside flocked to see Mrs. Rylands and her first baby. And a more considerate and devoted couple than the father and mother they had never known.

DICK SPINDLER'S FAMILY CHRISTMAS

THERE was surprise and sometimes disappointment in Rough and Ready, when it was known that Dick Spindler intended to give a "family" Christmas party at his own house. That he should take an early opportunity to celebrate his good fortune and show hospitality was only expected from the man who had just made a handsome "strike" on his claim; but that it should assume so conservative, old-fashioned, and respectable a form was quite unlooked-for by Rough and Ready, and was thought by some a trifle pretentious. There were not half-a-dozen families in Rough and Ready; nobody ever knew before that Spindler had any relations, and this "ringing in" of strangers to the settlement seemed to indicate at least a lack of public spirit. "He might," urged one of his critics, "hev given the boys, — that had worked alongside o' him in the ditches by day, and slung lies with him around the camp-fire by night, — he might hev given them a square 'blow out,' and kep' the leavin's for his old Spindler crew, just as other families do. Why, when old man Scudder had his house-raisin' last year, his family lived for a week on what was left over, arter the boys had waltzed through the house that night, — and the Scudders warn't strangers, either." It was also evident that there was an uneasy feeling that Spindler's action indicated an unhallowed leaning towards the minority of respectability and exclusiveness, and a desertion — without the excuse of matrimony — of the convivial and independent bachelor majority of Rough and Ready.

"Ef he was stuck after some gal and was kinder looking ahead, I 'd hev understood it," argued another critic.

"Don't ye be too sure he will," said Uncle Jim Starbuck grimly. "It'll be just like some humbug woman is at the bottom of this yer family gatherin'. That and trouble is about all they're made for."

There appeared to be some truth in this dark prophecy, but none of the kind that the misogynist supposed. In fact, Spindler had called a few evenings before at the house of the Rev. Mr. Saltover, and Mrs. Saltover, having one of her "saleratus headaches," had turned him over to her widow sister, Mrs. Hetty Price, who obediently bestowed upon him that practical and critical attention which she divided with the stocking she was darning. She was a woman of thirty-five, of singular nerve and practical wisdom, who had once smuggled her wounded husband home from a border affray, calmly made coffee for his deceived pursuers while he lay hidden in the loft, walked four miles for that medical assistance which arrived too late to save him, buried him secretly in his own "quarter section," with only one other witness and mourner, and so saved her position and property in that wild community, who believed he had fled. There was very little of this experience to be traced in her round, fresh-colored brunette cheek, her calm black eyes, set in a prickly hedge of stiff lashes, her plump figure, or her frank, courageous laugh. The latter appeared as a smile when she welcomed Mr. Spindler. "She had n't seen him for a coon's age," but "reckoned he was busy fixin' up his new house."

"Well, yes," said Spindler, with a slight hesitation, "ye see, I'm reckonin' to hev a kinder Christmas gatherin' of my" — he was about to say "folks," but dismissed it for "relations," and finally settled upon "relatives" as being more correct in a preacher's house.

Mrs. Price thought it a very good idea. Christmas was the natural season for the family to gather to "see who's here and who's there, who's gettin' on and who is n't, and

who 's dead and buried. It was lucky for them who were so placed that they could do so and be joyful." Her invincible philosophy probably carried her past any dangerous recollections of the lonely grave in Kansas, and holding up the stocking to the light, she glanced cheerfully along its level to Mr. Spindler's embarrassed face by the fire.

"Well, I can't say much ez to that," responded Spindler, still awkwardly, "for you see I don't know much about it anyway."

"How long since you 've seen 'em?" asked Mrs. Price, apparently addressing herself to the stocking.

Spindler gave a weak laugh. "Well, you see, ef it comes to that, I 've never seen 'em!"

Mrs. Price put the stocking in her lap and opened her direct eyes on Spindler. "Never seen 'em?" she repeated. "Then, they 're not near relations?"

"There are three cousins," said Spindler, checking them off on his fingers, "a half-uncle, a kind of brother-in-law, — that is, the brother of my sister-in-law's second husband, — and a niece. That 's six."

"But if you 've not seen them, I suppose they 've corresponded with you?" said Mrs. Price.

"They 've nearly all of 'em written to me for money, seeing my name in the paper ez hevin' made a strike," returned Spindler simply; "and hevin' sent it, I jest know their addresses."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Price, returning to the stocking.

Something in the tone of her ejaculation increased Spindler's embarrassment, but it also made him desperate. "You see, Mrs. Price," he blurted out, "I oughter tell ye that I reckon they are the folks that 'hev n't got on,' don't you see, and so it seemed only the square thing for me, ez had 'got on,' to give them a sort o' Christmas festival. Suthin', don't ye know, like what your brother-in-law was sayin' last Sunday in the pulpit about this yer peace and goodwill 'twixt man and man."

Mrs. Price looked again at the man before her. His sallow, perplexed face exhibited some doubt, yet a certain determination, regarding the prospect the quotation had opened to him. "A very good idea, Mr. Spindler, and one that does you great credit," she said gravely.

"I 'm mighty glad to hear you say so, Mrs. Price," he said, with an accent of great relief, "for I reckoned to ask you a great favor! You see," he fell into his former hesitation, "that is — the fact is — that this sort o' thing is rather suddent to me, — a little outer my line, don't you see, and I was goin' to ask ye ef you 'd mind takin' the hull thing in hand and runnin' it for me."

"Running it for you," said Mrs. Price, with a quick eye-shot from under the edge of her lashes. "Man alive! What are you thinking of?"

"Bossin' the whole job for me," hurried on Spindler, with nervous desperation. "Gettin' together all the things and makin' ready for 'em, — orderin' in everythin' that 's wanted, and fixin' up the rooms, — I kin step out while you 're doin' it, — and then helpin' me receivin' 'em, and sittin' at the head o' the table, you know, — like ez ef you was the mistress."

"But," said Mrs. Price, with her frank laugh, "that 's the duty of one of your relations, — your niece, for instance, — or cousin, if one of them is a woman."

"But," persisted Spindler, "you see, they 're strangers to me; I don't know 'em, and I do you. You 'd make it easy for 'em, — and for me, — don't you see? Kinder introduce 'em, — don't you know? A woman of your gin'ral experience would smooth down all them little difficulties," continued Spindler, with a vague recollection of the Kansas story, "and put everybody on velvet. Don't say 'No,' Mrs. Price! I 'm just calkilatin' on you."

Sincerity and persistency in a man goes a great way with even the best of women. Mrs. Price, who had at first

received Spindler's request as an amusing originality, now began to incline secretly towards it. And, of course, began to suggest objections.

"I 'm afraid it won't do," she said thoughtfully, awakening to the fact that it would do and could be done. "You see, I 've promised to spend Christmas at Sacramento with my nieces from Baltimore. And then there 's Mr. Saltover and my sister to consult."

But here Spindler's simple face showed such signs of distress that the widow declared she would "think it over," — a process which the sanguine Spindler seemed to consider so nearly akin to talking it over that Mrs. Price began to believe it herself, as he hopefully departed.

She "thought it over" sufficiently to go to Sacramento and excuse herself to her nieces. But here she permitted herself to "talk it over," to the infinite delight of those Baltimore girls, who thought this extravaganza of Spindler's "so Californian and eccentric!" So that it was not strange that presently the news came back to Rough and Ready, and his old associates learned for the first time that he had never seen his relatives, and that they would be doubly strangers. This did not increase his popularity; neither, I grieve to say, did the intelligence that his relatives were probably poor, and that the Reverend Mr. Saltover had approved of his course, and had likened it to the rich man's feast, to which the halt and blind were invited. Indeed, the allusion was supposed to add hypocrisy and a bid for popularity to Spindler's defection, for it was argued that he might have feasted "Wall-eyed Joe" or "Tanglefoot Billy," — who had once been "chawed" by a bear while prospecting, — if he had been sincere. Howbeit, Spindler's faith was oblivious to these criticisms, in his joy at Mr. Saltover's adhesion to his plans and the loan of Mrs. Price as a hostess. In fact, he proposed to her that the invitation should also convey that information in the

expression, "by the kind permission of the Rev. Mr. Saltover," as a guarantee of good faith, but the widow would have none of it. The invitations were duly written and dispatched.

"Suppose," suggested Spindler, with a sudden lugubrious apprehension, — "suppose they should n't come?"

"Have no fear of that," said Mrs. Price, with a frank laugh.

"Or ef they was dead," continued Spindler.

"They could n't all be dead," said the widow cheerfully.

"I 've written to another cousin by marriage," said Spindler dubiously, "in case of accident; I did n't think of him before, because he was rich."

"And have you ever seen him either, Mr. Spindler?" asked the widow, with a slight mischievousness.

"Lordy! No!" he responded, with unaffected concern.

Only one mistake was made by Mrs. Price in her arrangements for the party. She had noticed what the simple-minded Spindler could never have conceived, — the feeling towards him held by his old associates, and had tactfully suggested that a general invitation should be extended to them in the evening.

"You can have refreshments, you know, too, after the dinner, and games and music."

"But," said the unsophisticated host, "won't the boys think I 'm playing it rather low down on them, so to speak, givin' 'em a kind o' second table, as ef it was the tailings after a strike?"

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Price, with decision. "It 's quite fashionable in San Francisco, and just the thing to do."

To this decision Spindler, in his blind faith in the widow's management, weakly yielded. An announcement in the "Weekly Banner" that, "On Christmas evening Richard Spindler, Esq., proposed to entertain his friends

and fellow citizens at an 'at home,' in his own residence," not only widened the breach between him and the "boys," but awakened an active resentment that only waited for an outlet. It was understood that they were all coming; but that they should have "some fun out of it" which might not coincide with Spindler's nor his relatives' sense of humor seemed a foregone conclusion.

Unfortunately, too, subsequent events lent themselves to this irony of the situation. A few mornings after the invitations were dispatched, Spindler, at one of his daily conferences with Mrs. Price, took a newspaper from his pocket. "It seems," he said, looking at her with an embarrassed gravity, "that we will have to take one o' them names off that list, — the name o' Sam Spindler, — and calkilate upon only six relations coming."

"Ah," said Mrs. Price interestedly, "then you have had an answer, and he has declined?"

"Not that exactly," said Spindler slowly, "but from remarks in this yer paper, he was hung last week by the Vigilance Committee of Yolo."

Mrs. Price opened her eyes on Spindler's face as she took the paper from his hand. "But," she said quickly, "this may be all a mistake, some other Spindler! You know, you say you 've never seen them!"

"I reckon it 's no mistake," said Spindler, with patient gravity, "for the Committee sent me back my invitation, with the kinder disparagin' remark that they 've 'sent him where it ain't bin the habit to keep Christmas!'"

Mrs. Price gasped, but a glance at Spindler's patient, wistful, inquiring eyes brought back her old courage. "Well," she said cheerfully, "perhaps it 's just as well he did n't come."

"Are ye sure o' that, Mrs. Price?" said Spindler, with a slightly troubled expression. "Seems to me, now, that he was the sort as might hev bin gathered in at the feast,

and kinder snatched like a brand from the burnin', accordin' to Scripter. But ye know best."

"Mr. Spindler," said Mrs. Price suddenly, with a slight snap in her black eyes, "are your — are the others like this? Or" — here her eyes softened again, and her laugh returned, albeit slightly hysterical — "is this kind of thing likely to happen again?"

"I think we 're pretty sartin o' hevin' six to dinner," returned Spindler simply. Then, as if noticing some other significance in her speech, he added wistfully, "But you won't go back on me, Mrs. Price, ef things ain't pannin' out exackly as I reckoned? You see, I never really knew these yer relations."

He was so obviously sincere in his intent, and, above all, seemed to place such a pathetic reliance on her judgment, that she hesitated to let him know the shock his revelation had given her. And what might his other relations prove to be? Good Lord! Yet, oddly enough, she was so prepossessed by him, and so fascinated by his very Quixotism, that it was perhaps for these complex reasons that she said a little stiffly: —

"One of these cousins, I see, is a lady, and then there is your niece. Do you know anything about them, Mr. Spindler?"

His face grew serious. "No more than I know of the others," he said apologetically. After a moment's hesitation he went on: "Now you speak of it, it seems to me I 've heard that my niece was di-vorced. But," he added, brightening up, "I 've heard that she was popular."

Mrs. Price gave a short laugh, and was silent for a few minutes. Then this sublime little woman looked up at him. What he might have seen in her eyes was more than he expected, or, I fear, deserved. "Cheer up, Mr. Spindler," she said manfully. "I 'll see you through this thing, don't you mind! But don't you say anything about —

about — this Vigilance Committee business to anybody. Nor about your niece — it was your niece, was n't. it ? — being divorced. Charley [the late Mr. Price] had a queer sort of sister, who — but that 's neither here nor there ! And your niece may n't come, you know ; or if she does, you ain't bound to bring her out to the general company."

At parting, Spindler, in sheer gratefulness, pressed her hand, and lingered so long over it that a little color sprang into the widow's brown cheek. Perhaps a fresh courage sprang into her heart, too, for she went to Sacramento the next day, previously enjoining Spindler on no account to show any answers he might receive. At Sacramento her nieces flew to her with confidences.

"We so wanted to see you, Aunt Huldy, for we 've heard something so delightful about your funny Christmas Party ! " Mrs. Price's heart sank, but her eyes snapped. "Only think of it ! One of Mr. Spindler's lŏng-lost relatives — a Mr. Wragg — lives in this hotel, and papa knows him. He 's a sort of half-uncle, I believe, and he 's just furious that Spindler should have invited him. He showed papa the letter ; said it was the greatest piece of insolence in the world ; that Spindler was an ostentatious fool, who had made a little money and wanted to use him to get into society ; and the fun of the whole thing was that this half-uncle and whole brute is himself a parvenu, — a vulgar, ostentatious creature, who was only a " —

"Never mind what he was, Kate," interrupted Mrs. Price hastily. "I call his conduct a shame."

"So do we," said both girls eagerly. After a pause Kate clasped her knees with her locked fingers, and rocking backwards and forwards said, "Milly and I have got an idea, and don't you say 'No' to it. We 've had it ever since that brute talked in that way. Now, through him we know more about this Mr. Spindler's family connections than you do ; and we know all the trouble you and he 'll

[illegible] You understand? Now, we [illegible] Is he a savage [illegible] like the miners we saw on the [illegible]?"

Mrs. Price said that on the contrary, he was very gentle, [illegible] and rather good-looking.

"Young or old?"

"Young, — in fact, a mere boy, as you may judge from his actions," returned Mrs. Price with a suggestive matronly air.

Kate here put up a long-handled eyeglass to her fine gray eyes, fitted it ostentatiously over her aquiline nose, and then said, in a voice of simulated horror, "Aunt Huldy, — this revelation is shocking!"

Mrs. Price laughed her usual frank laugh, albeit her brown cheek took upon it a faint tint of Indian red. "If that's the wonderful idea you girls have got, I don't see how it's going to help matters," she said dryly.

"No, that's not it! We really have an idea. Now look here."

Mrs. Price "looked here." This process seemed to the superficial observer to be merely submitting her waist and shoulders to the arms of her nieces, and her ears to their confidential and coaxing voices.

Twice she said "it could n't be thought of," and "it was impossible;" once addressed Kate as "You limb!" and finally said that she "would n't promise, but might write!"

. . . . . .

It was two days before Christmas. There was nothing in the air, sky, or landscape of that Sierran slope to suggest the season to the Eastern stranger. A soft rain had been dropping for a week on laurel, pine, and buckeye, and the blades of springing grasses and shyly opening flowers. Sedate and silent hillsides that had grown dumb and parched towards the end of the dry season became gently articulate

again; there were murmurs in hushed and forgotten cañons, the leap and laugh of water among the dry bones of dusty creeks, and the full song of the larger forks and rivers. Southwest winds brought the warm odor of the pine sap swelling in the forest, or the faint, far-off spice of wild mustard springing in the lower valleys. But, as if by some irony of Nature, this gentle invasion of spring in the wild wood brought only disturbance and discomfort to the haunts and works of man. The ditches were overflowed, the fords of the Fork impassable, the sluicing adrift, and the trails and wagon roads to Rough and Ready knee-deep in mud. The stagecoach from Sacramento, entering the settlement by the mountain highway, its wheels and panels clogged and crusted with an unctuous pigment like mud and blood, passed out of it through the overflowed and dangerous ford, and emerged in spotless purity, leaving its stains behind with Rough and Ready. A week of enforced idleness on the river "Bar" had driven the miners to the more comfortable recreation of the saloon bar, its mirrors, its florid paintings, its armchairs, and its stove. The steam of their wet boots and the smoke of their pipes hung over the latter like the sacrificial incense from an altar. But the attitude of the men was more critical and censorious than contented, and showed little of the gentleness of the weather or season.

"Did you hear if the stage brought down any more relations of Spindler's?"

The bar-keeper, to whom this question was addressed, shifted his lounging position against the bar and said, "I reckon not, ez far ez I know."

"And that old bloat of a second cousin — that crimson beak — what kem down yesterday, — he ain't bin hangin' round here to-day for his reg'lar pizon?"

"No," said the bar-keeper thoughtfully, "I reckon Spindler 's got him locked up, and is settin' on him to keep

[illegible] Christmas, [illegible] boys gettin' [illegible]

[illegible] remarked the first [illegible] Bill in the [illegible] town. [illegible] Bill wouldn't [illegible] Spindler's and collected [illegible] Spindler [illegible] he'd give him [illegible]

[illegible] of the menagerie," said the [illegible] Mrs. Price hez [illegible] feelin' [illegible] know the old woman — that fifty-fifth [illegible] marriage — whom [illegible] swears he remem- [illegible] for a Chinese restaurant in Stockton, — [illegible] that Mrs. Price has n't rigged her out in [illegible] of her own, and made her look quite [illegible]"

A deep groan here broke from Uncle Jim Starbuck.

"[illegible] I tell ye?" he said, turning appealingly to the others. "It's that darned widder that's at the bottom of it all! She first put Spindler up to givin' the party, and now, darn my skin, ef she ain't goin' to fix up these raga-muffins and drill 'em so we can't get any fun outer 'em after all! And it's bein' a woman that's bossin' the job, and not Spindler, we've got to draw things mighty fine and not cut up too rough, or some of the boys will kick."

"You bet," said a surly but decided voice in the crowd.

"And," said another voice, "Mrs. Price did n't live in 'Bleeding Kansas' for nothing."

"Wot's the programme you've settled on, Uncle Jim?" said the bar keeper lightly, to check what seemed to promise a dangerous discussion.

"Well," said Starbuck, "we calkilate to gather early Christmas night in Hooper's Hollow and rig ourselves up Injun fashion, and then start for Spindler's with pitch-pine

torches, and have a 'torchlight dance' around the house; them who does the dancin' and yellin' outside takin' their turn at goin' in and hevin' refreshment. Jake Cooledge, of Boston, sez if anybody objects to it, we've only got to say we're 'Mummers of the Olden Times,' sabe? Then, later, we'll have 'Them Sabbath Evening Bells' performed on prospectin' pans by the band. Then, at the finish, Jake Cooledge is goin' to give one of his surkastic speeches, — kinder welcomin' Spindler's family to the Free Openin' o' Spindler's Almshouse and Reformatory." He paused, possibly for that approbation which, however, did not seem to come spontaneously. "It ain't much," he added apologetically, "for we're hampered by women; but we'll add to the programme ez we see how things pan out. Ye see, from what we can hear, all of Spindler's relations ain't on hand yet! We've got to wait, like in elekshun times, for 'returns from the back counties.' Hello! What's that?"

It was the swish and splutter of hoofs on the road before the door. The Sacramento coach! In an instant every man was expectant, and Starbuck darted outside on the platform. Then there was the usual greeting and bustle, the hurried ingress of thirsty passengers into the saloon, and a pause. Uncle Jim returned, excitedly and pantingly. "Look yer, boys! Ef this ain't the richest thing out! They say there's two more relations o' Spindler's on the coach, come down as express freight, consigned, — d' ye hear? — consigned to Spindler!"

"Stiffs, in coffins?" suggested an eager voice.

"I didn't get to hear more. But here they are."

There was the sudden irruption of a laughing, curious crowd into the bar-room, led by Yuba Bill, the driver. Then the crowd parted, and out of their midst stepped two children, a boy and a girl, the oldest apparently of not more than six years, holding each other's hands. They

were coarsely yet clearly dressed and with a certain uniform precision that suggested formal charity. But more remarkable than all around the neck of each was a little steel chain, from which depended the regular check and label of the powerful Express Company, Wells, Fargo & Co., and the words: "To Richard Spindler." "Fragile." "With great care." "Collect on delivery." Occasionally their little hands went up automatically and touched their labels, as if to show them. They surveyed the crowd, the floor, the gilded bar, and Yuba Bill without fear and without wonder. There was a pathetic suggestion that they were accustomed to this observation.

"Now, Bobby," said Yuba Bill, leaning back against the bar, with an air half paternal, half managerial, "tell these gents how you came here."

"By Wellth, Fargoth Expreth," lisped Bobby.

"What from?"

"Wed Hill, Owegon."

"Red Hill, Oregon? Why, it 's a thousand miles from here," said a bystander.

"I reckon," said Yuba Bill coolly, "they kem by stage to Portland, by steamer to 'Frisco, steamer again to Stockton, and then by stage over the whole line. Allers by Wells, Fargo & Co.'s Express, from agent to agent, and from messenger to messenger. Fact! They ain't bin tetched or handled by any one but the Kempany's agents; they ain't had a line or direction except them checks around their necks! And they 've wanted for nothin' else. Why, I 've carried heaps o' treasure before, gentlemen, and once a hundred thousand dollars in greenbacks, but I never carried anythin' that was watched and guarded as them kids! Why, the division inspector at Stockton wanted to go with 'em over the line; but Jim Bracy, the messenger, said he 'd call it a reflection on himself and resign, ef they did n't give 'em to him with the other packages! Ye had a pretty

good time, Bobby, did n't ye? Plenty to eat and drink, eh?"

The two children laughed a little weak laugh, turned each other bashfully around, and then looked up shyly at Yuba Bill and said, "Yeth."

"Do you know where you are goin'?" asked Starbuck, in a constrained voice.

It was the little girl who answered quickly and eagerly:—

"Yes, to Krissmass and Sandy Claus."

"To what?" asked Starbuck.

Here the boy interposed with a superior air:—

"Thee meanth Couthin Dick. He 'th got Krithmath."

"Where 's your mother?"

"Dead."

"And your father?"

"In orthpittal."

There was a laugh somewhere on the outskirts of the crowd. Every one faced angrily in that direction, but the laugher had disappeared. Yuba Bill, however, sent his voice after him. "Yes, in hospital! Funny, ain't it? — amoosin' place! Try it. Step over here, and in five minutes, by the living Hoky, I 'll qualify you for admission, and not charge you a cent!" He stopped, gave a sweeping glance of dissatisfaction around him, and then, leaning back against the bar, beckoned to some one near the door, and said in a disgusted tone, "You tell these galoots how it happened, Bracy. They make me sick!"

Thus appealed to, Bracy, the express messenger, stepped forward in Yuba Bill's place.

"It 's nothing particular, gentlemen," he said, with a laugh, "only it seems that some man called Spindler, who lives about here, sent an invitation to the father of these children to bring his family to a Christmas party. It was n't a bad sort of thing for Spindler to do, considering that they were his poor relations, though they did n't know

him from Adam, — was it?" He paused: several of the bystanders cleared their throats, but said nothing. "At least," resumed Brady, "that's what the boys up at Red Hill, Oregon, thought when they heard of it. Well, as the father was in hospital with a broken leg, and the mother only a few weeks dead, the boys thought it mighty rough on these poor kids if they were done out of their fun because they had no one to bring them. The boys could n't afford to go themselves, but they got a little money together, and then got the idea of sendin' 'em by express. Our agent at Red Hill tumbled to the idea at once; but he would n't take any money in advance, and said he would send 'em 'C. O. D.' like any other package. And he did, and here they are! That 's all! And now, gentlemen, as I 've got to deliver them personally to this Spindler, and get his receipt and take off their checks, I reckon we must toddle. Come, Bill, help take 'em up!"

"Hold on!" said a dozen voices. A dozen hands were thrust into a dozen pockets; I grieve to say some were regretfully withdrawn empty, for it was a hard season in Rough and Ready. But the expressman stepped before them, with warning, uplifted hand.

"Not a cent, boys, — not a cent! Wells, Fargo's Express Company don't undertake to carry bullion with those kids, at least on the same contract!" He laughed, and then, looking around him, said confidentially in a lower voice, which, however, was quite audible to the children, "There 's as much as three bags of silver in quarter and half dollars in my treasure box in the coach that has been poured, yes, just showered upon them, ever since they started, and has been passed over from agent to agent and messenger to messenger, — enough to pay their passage from here to China! It 's time to say quits now. But bet your life, they are not going to that Christmas party poor!"

He caught up the boy, as Yuba Bill lifted the little girl to his shoulder, and both passed out. Then one by one the loungers in the bar-room silently and awkwardly followed, and when the bar-keeper turned back from putting away his decanters and glasses, to his astonishment the room was empty.

. . . . . .

Spindler's house, or "Spindler's Splurge," as Rough and Ready chose to call it, stood above the settlement, on a deforested hillside, which, however, revenged itself by producing not enough vegetation to cover even the few stumps that were ineradicable. A large wooden structure in the pseudo-classic style affected by Westerners, with an incongruous cupola, it was oddly enough relieved by a still more incongruous veranda extending around its four sides, upheld by wooden Doric columns, which were already picturesquely covered with flowering vines and sun-loving roses. Mr. Spindler had trusted the furnishing of its interior to the same contractor who had upholstered the gilded bar-room of the Eureka Saloon, and who had apparently bestowed the same design and material, impartially, on each. There were gilded mirrors all over the house and chilly marble-topped tables, gilt plaster Cupids in the corners, and stuccoed lions "in the way" everywhere. The tactful hands of Mrs. Price had screened some of these with seasonable laurels, fir boughs, and berries, and had imparted a slight Christmas flavor to the house. But the greater part of her time had been employed in trying to subdue the eccentricities of Spindler's amazing relations; in tranquilizing Mrs. "Aunt" Martha Spindler, — the elderly cook before alluded to, — who was inclined to regard the gilded splendors of the house as indicative of dangerous immorality; in restraining "Cousin" Morley Hewlett from considering the dining-room buffet as a bar for "intermittent refreshment;" and in keeping the

weak-minded nephew, Phinney Spindler, from shooting at bottles from the veranda, wearing his uncle's clothes, or running up an account in his uncle's name for various articles at the general stores. Yet the unlooked-for arrival of the two children had been the one great compensation and diversion for her. She wrote at once to her nieces a brief account of her miraculous deliverance. "I think these poor children dropped from the skies here to make our Christmas party possible, to say nothing of the sympathy they have created in Rough and Ready for Spindler. He is going to keep them as long as he can, and is writing to the father. Think of the poor little tots traveling a thousand miles to 'Krissmass,' as they call it! — though they were so well cared for by the messengers that their little bodies were positively stuffed like quails. So you see, dear, we will be able to get along without airing your famous idea. I 'm sorry, for I know you 're just dying to see it all."

Whatever Kate's "idea" might have been, there certainly seemed now no need of any extraneous aid to Mrs. Price's management. Christmas came at last, and the dinner passed off without serious disaster. But the ordeal of the reception of Rough and Ready was still to come. For Mrs. Price well knew that although "the boys" were more subdued, and, indeed, inclined to sympathize with their host's uncouth endeavor, there was still much in the aspect of Spindler's relations to excite their sense of the ludicrous.

But here Fortune again favored the house of Spindler with a dramatic surprise, even greater than the advent of the children had been. In the change that had come over Rough and Ready, "the boys" had decided, out of deference to the women and children, to omit the first part of their programme, and had approached and entered the house as soberly and quietly as ordinary guests. But be-

fore they had shaken hands with the host and hostess, and seen the relations, the clatter of wheels was heard before the open door, and its lights flashed upon a carriage and pair, — an actual private carriage, — the like of which had not been seen since the governor of the State had come down to open the new ditch! Then there was a pause, the flash of the carriage lamps upon white silk, the light tread of a satin foot on the veranda and in the hall, and the entrance of a vision of loveliness! Middle-aged men and old dwellers of cities remembered their youth; younger men bethought themselves of Cinderella and the Prince! There was a thrill and a hush as this last guest — a beautiful girl, radiant with youth and adornment — put a dainty glass to her sparkling eye and advanced familiarly, with outstretched hand, to Dick Spindler. Mrs. Price gave a single gasp, and drew back speechless.

"Uncle Dick," said a laughing contralto voice, which, indeed, somewhat recalled Mrs. Price's own, in its courageous frankness, "I am so delighted to come, even if a little late, and so sorry that Mr. M'Kenna could not come on account of business."

Everybody listened eagerly, but none more eagerly and surprisingly than the host himself. M'Kenna! The rich cousin who had never answered the invitation! And Uncle Dick! This, then, was his divorced niece! Yet even in his astonishment he remembered that of course no one but himself and Mrs. Price knew it, — and that lady had glanced discreetly away.

"Yes," continued the half-niece brightly. "I came from Sacramento with some friends to Shootersville, and from thence I drove here; and though I must return to-night, I could not forego the pleasure of coming, if it was only for an hour or two, to answer the invitation of the uncle I have not seen for years." She paused, and, raising her glasses, turned a politely questioning eye towards Mrs.

Price. "One of our relations?" she said smilingly to Spindler.

"No," said Spindler, with some embarrassment, "a — a friend!"

The half-niece extended her hand. Mrs. Price took it.

But the fair stranger, — what she did and said were the only things remembered in Rough and Ready on that festive occasion; no one thought of the other relations; no one recalled them nor their eccentricities; Spindler himself was forgotten. People only recollected how Spindler's lovely niece lavished her smiles and courtesies on every one, and brought to her feet particularly the misogynist Starbuck and the sarcastic Cooledge, oblivious of his previous speech; how she sat at the piano and sang like an angel, hushing the most hilarious and excited into sentimental and even maudlin silence; how, graceful as a nymph, she led with "Uncle Dick" a Virginia reel until the whole assembly joined, eager for a passing touch of her dainty hand in its changes; how, when two hours had passed, — all too swiftly for the guests, — they stood with bared heads and glistening eyes on the veranda to see the fairy coach whirl the fairy princess away! How — but this incident was never known to Rough and Ready.

It happened in the sacred dressing-room, where Mrs. Price was cloaking with her own hands the departing half-niece of Mr. Spindler. Taking that opportunity to seize the lovely relative by the shoulders and shake her violently, she said: "Oh, yes, and it 's all very well for you, Kate, you limb! For you 're going away, and will never see Rough and Ready and poor Spindler again. But what am I to do, miss? How am I to face it out? For you know I 've got to tell him at least that you 're no half-niece of his!"

"Have you?" said the young lady.

"Have I?" repeated the widow impatiently. "Have I? Of course I have! What are you thinking of?"

"I was thinking, aunty," said the girl audaciously, "that from what I 've seen and heard to-night, if I 'm not his half-niece now, it 's only a question of time! So you 'd better wait. Good-night, dear."

And, really, — it turned out that she was right!

LIBERTY JONES'S DISCOVERY

IT was at best merely a rocky trail winding along a shelf of the eastern slope of the Santa Cruz range, yet the only road between the sea and the inland valley. The hoof-prints of a whole century of zigzagging mules were impressed on the soil, regularly soaked by winter rains and dried by summer suns during that period; the occasional ruts of heavy, rude, wooden wheels — long obsolete — were still preserved and visible. Weather-worn boulders and ledges, lying in the unclouded glare of an August sky, radiated a quivering heat that was intolerable, even while above them the masts of gigantic pines rocked their tops in the cold southwestern trades from the unseen ocean beyond. A red, burning dust lay everywhere, as if the heat were slowly and visibly precipitating itself.

The creaking of wheels and axles, the muffled plunge of hoofs, and the cough of a horse in the dust thus stirred presently broke the profound woodland silence. Then a dirty white canvas-covered emigrant wagon slowly arose with the dust along the ascent. It was travel-stained and worn, and with its rawboned horses seemed to have reached the last stage of its journey and fitness. The only occupants, a man and a girl, appeared to be equally jaded and exhausted, with the added querulousness of discontent in their sallow and badly nourished faces. Their voices, too, were not unlike the creaking they had been pitched to overcome, and there was an absence of reserve and consciousness in their speech, which told pathetically of an equal absence of society.

"It 's no user talkin'! I tell ye, ye hain't got no more

sense than a coyote! I 'm sick and tired of it, doggoned if I ain't! Ye ain't no more use nor a hossfly, — and jest ez hinderin'! It was along o' you that we lost the stock at Laramie, and ef ye 'd bin at all decent and takin', we 'd hev had kempany that helped, instead of laggin' on yere alone!"

"What did ye bring me for?" retorted the girl shrilly. "I might hev stayed with Aunt Marty. I was n't hankerin' to come."

"Bring ye for?" repeated her father contemptuously; "I reckoned ye might be o' some account here, whar wimmin folks is skeerce, in the way o' helpin', — and mebbe gettin' yer married to some likely feller. Mighty much chance o' that, with yer yaller face and skin and bones."

"Ye can't blame me for takin' arter you, dad," she said, with a shrill laugh, but no other resentment of his brutality.

"Ye want somebody to take arter you — with a club," he retorted angrily. "Ye hear! Wot 's that ye 're doin' now?"

She had risen and walked to the tail of the wagon. "Goin' to get out and walk. I 'm tired o' bein' jawed at."

She jumped into the road. The act was neither indignant nor vengeful; the frequency of such scenes had blunted their sting. She was probably "tired" of the quarrel, and ended it rudely. Her father, however, let fly a Parthian arrow.

"Ye need n't think I 'm goin' to wait for ye, ez I hev! Ye 've got to keep tetch with the team, or get left. And a good riddance of bad rubbidge."

In reply the girl dived into the underwood beside the trail, picked a wild berry or two, stripped a wand of young hazel she had broken off, and switching it at her side, skipped along on the outskirts of the wood and ambled after the wagon. Seen in the full, merciless glare of a

Californian sky, she justified her father's description; thin and bony, her lank frame outstripped the body of her ragged calico dress, which was only kept on her shoulders by straps. — possibly her father's cast-off braces. A boy's soft felt hat covered her head, and shadowed her only notable feature, a pair of large dark eyes, looking larger for the hollow temples which narrowed the frame in which they were set.

So long as the wagon crawled up the ascent the girl knew she could easily keep up with it, or even distance the tired horses. She made one or two incursions into the wood, returning, like an animal from quest of food, with something in her mouth, which she was tentatively chewing, and once only with some inedible *mandrono* berries, plucked solely for their brilliant coloring. It was very hot and singularly close; the higher current of air had subsided, and, looking up, a singular haze seemed to have taken its place between the tree-tops. Suddenly she heard a strange, rumbling sound; an odd giddiness overtook her, and she was obliged to clutch at a sapling to support herself; she laughed vacantly, though a little frightened, and looked vaguely towards the summit of the road; but the wagon had already disappeared. A strange feeling of nausea then overcame her; she spat out the leaves she had been chewing, disgustedly. But the sensation as quickly passed, and she once more sought the trail and began slowly to follow the tracks of the wagon. The air blew freshly, the tree-tops began again to rock over her head, and the incident was forgotten.

Presently she paused; she must have missed the trail, for the wagon tracks had ended abruptly before a large boulder that lay across the mountain trail. She dipped into the woods again; here there were other wagon tracks that confused her. It was like her dogged, stupid father to miss the trail; she felt a gleam of malicious satisfaction at

his discomfiture. Sooner or later, he would have to retrace his steps and virtually come back for her! She took up a position where two rough wheel ruts and tracks intersected each other, one of which must be the missing trail. She noticed, too, the broader hoof-prints of cattle without the following wheel ruts, and instead of traces, the long, smooth trails made by the dragging of logs, and knew by these tokens that she must be near the highway or some woodman's hut or ranch. She began to be thirsty, and was glad, presently, when her quick, rustic ear caught the tinkling of water. Yet it was not so easy to discover, and she was getting footsore and tired again before she found it, some distance away, in a gully coming from a fissure in a dislocated piece of outcrop. It was beautifully clear, cold, and sparkling, with a slightly sweetish taste, yet unlike the brackish "alkali" of the plains. It refreshed and soothed her greatly, so much that, reclining against a tree, but where she would be quite visible from the trail, her eyes closed dreamily, and presently she slept.

When she awoke, the shafts of sunlight were striking almost level into her eyes. She must have slept two hours. Her father had not returned; she knew the passage of the wagon would have awakened her. She began to feel strange, but not yet alarmed; it was only the uncertainty that made her uneasy. Had her father gone on by some other trail? Or had he really hurried on and left her, as he said he would? The thought brought an odd excitement to her rather than any fear. A sudden sense of freedom, as if some galling chain had dropped from her, sent a singular thrill through her frame. Yet she felt confused with her independence, not knowing what to do with it, and momentarily dazzled with the possible gift.

At this moment she heard voices, and the figures of two men appeared on the trail.

They were talking earnestly, and walking as if familiar

with the spot, yet gazing around them as if at some novelty of the aspect.

"And look there," said one; "there has been some serious disturbance of that outcrop," pointing in the direction of the spring; "the lower part has distinctly subsided." He spoke with a certain authority, and dominance of position, and was evidently the superior, as he was the elder of the two, although both were roughly dressed.

"Yes, it does kinder look as if it had lost its holt, like the ledge yonder."

"And you see I am right; the movement was from east to west," continued the elder man.

The girl could not comprehend what they said, and even thought them a little silly. But she advanced towards them; at which they stopped short, staring at her. With feminine instinct she addressed the more important one: —

"Ye ain't passed no wagon nor team goin' on, hev ye?"

"What sort of wagon?" said the man.

"Em'grant wagon, two yaller hosses. Old man — my dad — drivin'." She added the latter kinship as a protecting influence against strangers, in spite of her previous independence.

The men glanced at each other.

"How long ago?"

The girl suddenly remembered that she had slept two hours.

"Sens noon," she said hesitatingly.

"Since the earthquake?"

"Wot's that?"

The man came impatiently towards her. "How did you come here?"

"Got outer the wagon to walk. I reckon dad missed the trail, and hez got off somewhere where I can't find him."

"What trail was he on, — where was he going?"

"Sank Hozay,[1] I reckon. He was goin' up the grade —

[1] San José.

side o' the hill; he must hev turned off where there 's a big rock hangin' over."

"Did you *see* him turn off!"

"No."

The second man, who was in hearing distance, had turned away, and was ostentatiously examining the sky and the tree-tops; the man who had spoken to her joined him, and they said something in a low voice. They turned again and came slowly towards her. She, from some obscure sense of imitation, stared at the tree-tops and the sky as the second man had done. But the first man now laid his hand kindly on her shoulder and said, "Sit down."

Then they told her there had been an earthquake so strong that it had thrown down a part of the hillside, including the wagon trail. That a wagon team and driver, such as she had described, had been carried down with it, crushed to fragments, and buried under a hundred feet of rock in the gulch below. A party had gone down to examine, but it would be weeks perhaps before they found it, and she must be prepared for the worst. She looked at them vaguely and with tearless eyes.

"Then ye reckon dad 's dead?"

"We fear it."

"Then wot 's a-goin' to become o' me?" she said simply.

They glanced again at each other. "Have you no friends in California?" said the elder man.

"Nary one."

"What was your father going to do?"

"Dunno. I reckon *he* did n't either."

"You may stay here for the present," said the elder man meditatively. "Can you milk?"

The girl nodded. "And I suppose you know something about looking after stock?" he continued.

The girl remembered that her father thought she did n't, but this was no time for criticism, and she again nodded.

"Come with me," said the older man, rising. "I suppose," he added, glancing at her ragged frock, "everything you have is in the wagon."

She nodded, adding with the same cold naïveté, "It ain't much!"

They walked on, the girl following; at times straying furtively on either side, as if meditating an escape in the woods, — which indeed had once or twice been vaguely in her thoughts, — but chiefly to avoid further questioning and not to hear what the men said to each other. For they were evidently speaking of her, and she could not help hearing the younger repeat her words, "Wot's a-goin' to become o' me?" with considerable amusement, and the addition: "She 'll take care of herself, you bet! I call that remark o' hers the richest thing out."

"And *I* call the state of things that provoked it — monstrous!" said the elder man grimly. "You don't know the lives of these people."

Presently they came to an open clearing in the forest, yet so incomplete that many of the felled trees, partly lopped of their boughs, still lay where they had fallen. There was a cabin or dwelling of unplaned, unpainted boards; very simple in structure, yet made in a workmanlike fashion, quite unlike the usual log cabin she had seen. This made her think that the elder man was a "towny," and not a frontiersman like the other.

As they approached the cabin the elder man stopped, and turning to her, said: —

"Do you know Indians?"

The girl started, and then recovering herself with a quick laugh: "G'long! — there ain't any Injins here!"

"Not the kind *you* mean; these are very peaceful. There's a squaw here whom you will" — he stopped, hesitated as he looked critically at the girl, and then corrected himself — "who will help you."

He pushed open the cabin door and showed an interior, equally simple but well joined and fitted, — a marvel of neatness and finish to the frontier girl's eye. There were shelves and cupboards and other conveniences, yet with no ostentation of refinement to frighten her rustic sensibilities.

Then he pushed open another door leading into a shed and called "Waya." A stout, undersized Indian woman, fitted with a coarse cotton gown, but cleaner and more presentable than the girl's one frock, appeared in the doorway. "This is Waya, who attends to the cooking and cleaning," he said; "and by the way, what is your name?"

"Libby Jones."

He took a small memorandum book and a "stub" of pencil from his pocket. "Elizabeth Jones," he said, writing it down. The girl interposed a long red hand.

"No," she interrupted sharply, "not Elizabeth, but Libby, — short for Lib'rty."

"Liberty?"

"Yes."

"Liberty Jones, then. Well, Waya, this is Miss Jones, who will look after the cows and calves — and the dairy." Then glancing at her torn dress, he added: "You 'll find some clean things in there, until I can send up something from San José. Waya will show you."

Without further speech he turned away with the other man. When they were some distance from the cabin, the younger remarked: —

"More like a boy than a girl, ain't she?"

"So much the better for her work," returned the elder grimly.

"I reckon! I was only thinkin' she did n't han'some much either as a boy or girl, eh, doctor?" he pursued.

"Well! as *that* won't make much difference to the cows, calves, or the dairy, it need n't trouble *us*," returned the doctor dryly. But here a sudden outburst of laughter from

the cabin made them both turn in that direction. They were in time to see Liberty Jones issuing out of the cabin door in a large straw platter evidently belonging to the stack, and following her with half-laughing, half-frightened expostulations. The two men stopped and gazed at the spectacle.

"Don't seem to be takin' the old man's death very pow'-fully," said the younger, with a laugh.

"Quite as much as he deserved, I daresay," said the doctor curtly. "If the accident had happened to *her*, he would have whined and whimpered to us for the sake of getting something, but have been as much relieved, you may be certain. *She's too* young and too natural to be a hypocrite yet."

Suddenly the laughter ceased, and Liberty Jones's voice arose, shrill but masterful: "Thar, that'll do! Quit now! You jest get back to your scrubbin'—d' ye hear? I 'm boss o' this shanty, you bet!"

The doctor turned with a grim smile to his companion. "That's the only thing that bothered me, and I've been waiting for. She's settled it. She'll do. Come."

They turned away briskly through the wood. At the end of half an hour's walk they found the team that had brought them there in waiting, and drove towards San José. It was nearly ten miles before they passed another habitation or trace of clearing. And by this time night had fallen upon the cabin they had left, and upon the newly made orphan and her Indian companion, alone and contented in that trackless solitude.

. . . . . .

Liberty Jones had been a year at the cabin. In that time she had learned that her employer's name was Doctor Ruysdael, that he had a lucrative practice in San José, but had also "taken up" a league or two of wild forest land in the Santa Cruz range, which he preserved and held after a

fashion of his own, which gave him the reputation of being a "crank" among the very few neighbors his vast possessions permitted, and the equally few friends his singular tastes allowed him. It was believed that a man owning such an enormous quantity of timber land, who should refuse to set up a sawmill and absolutely forbid the felling of trees; who should decline to connect it with the highway to Santa Cruz, and close it against improvement and speculation, had given sufficient evidence of his insanity; but when to this was added the rumor that he himself was not only devoid of the human instinct of hunting the wild animals with which his domain abounded, but that he held it so sacred to their use as to forbid the firing of a gun within his limits, and that these restrictions were further preserved and "policed" by the scattered remnants of a band of aborigines, — known as "digger Injins," — it was seriously hinted that his eccentricity had acquired a political and moral significance, and demanded legislative interference. But the doctor was a rich man, a necessity to his patients, a good marksman, and, it was rumored, did not include his fellow men among the animals he had a distaste for killing.

Of all this, however, Liberty knew little and cared less. The solitude appealed to her sense of freedom; she did not "hanker" after a society she had never known. At the end of the first week, when the doctor communicated to her briefly, by letter, the convincing proofs of the death of her father and his entombment beneath the sunken cliff, she accepted the fact without comment or apparent emotion. Two months later, when her only surviving relative, "Aunt Marty," of Missouri, acknowledged the news — communicated by Doctor Ruysdael — with Scriptural quotations and the cheerful hope that it "would be a lesson to her" and she would "profit in her new place," she left her aunt's letter unanswered.

She looked after the cows and calves with an interest that was almost possessory, patronized and played with the squaw, — yet made her feel her inferiority, — and moved among the peaceful aborigines with the domination of a white woman and a superior. She tolerated the half-monthly visits of "Jim Hoskins," the young companion of the doctor, who she learned was the doctor's factor and overseer of the property, who lived seven miles away on an agricultural clearing, and whose control of her actions was evidently limited by the doctor, — for the doctor's sake alone. Nor was Mr. Hoskins inclined to exceed those limits. He looked upon her as something abnormal, — a "crank" as remarkable in her way as her patron was in his, neuter of sex and vague of race, and he simply restricted his supervision to the bringing and taking of messages. She remained sole queen of the domain. A rare straggler from the main road, penetrating this seclusion, might have scarcely distinguished her from Waya, in her coarse cotton gown and slouched hat, except for the free stride which contrasted with her companion's waddle. Once, in following an estrayed calf, she had crossed the highway and been saluted by a passing teamster in the digger dialect; yet the mistake left no sting in her memory. And, like the digger, she shrank from that civilization which had only proved a hard taskmaster.

The sole touch of human interest she had in her surroundings was in the rare visits of the doctor and his brief but sincere commendation of her rude and rustic work. It is possible that the strange, middle-aged, gray-haired, intellectual man, whose very language was at times mysterious and unintelligible to her, and whose suggestion of power awed her, might have touched some untried filial chord in her being. Although she felt that, save for absolute freedom, she was little more to him than she had been to her father, yet he had never told her she had "no sense," that she was "a hindrance," and he had even praised her

performance of her duties. Eagerly as she looked for his coming, in his actual presence she felt a singular uneasiness of which she was not entirely ashamed, and if she was relieved at his departure, it none the less left her to a delightful memory of him, a warm sense of his approval, and a fierce ambition to be worthy of it, for which she would have sacrificed herself or the other miserable retainers about her, as a matter of course. She had driven Waya and the other squaws far along the sparse tableland pasture in search of missing stock; she herself had lain out all night on the rocks beside an ailing heifer. Yet, while satisfied to earn his praise for the performance of her duty, for some feminine reason she thought more frequently of a casual remark he had made on his last visit: "You are stronger and more healthy in this air," he had said, looking critically into her face. "We have got that abominable alkali out of your system, and wholesome food will do the rest." She was not sure she had quite understood him, but she remembered that she had felt her face grow hot when he spoke, — perhaps because she had not understood him.

His next visit was a day or two delayed, and in her anxiety she had ventured as far as the highway to earnestly watch for his coming. From her hiding-place in the underwood she could see the team and Jim Hoskins already waiting for him. Presently she saw him drive up to the trail in a carryall with a party of ladies and gentlemen. He alighted, bade "Good-by" to the party, and the team turned to retrace its course. But in that single moment she had been struck and bewildered by what seemed to her the dazzlingly beautiful apparel of the women, and their prettiness. She felt a sudden consciousness of her own coarse, shapeless calico gown, her straggling hair, and her felt hat, and a revulsion of feeling seized her. She crept like a wounded animal out of the underwood, and then ran swiftly and almost fiercely back towards the cabin. She ran so fast

that for a time she almost kept pace with the doctor and Hoskins in the wagon on the distant trail. Then she dived into the underwood again, and making a short cut through the forest, came at the end of two hours within hailing distance of the cabin, — footsore and exhausted, in spite of the strange excitement that had driven her back. Here she thought she heard voices — his voice among the rest — calling her, but the same singular revulsion of feeling hurried her vaguely on again, even while she experienced a foolish savage delight in not answering the summons. In this erratic wandering she came upon the spring she had found on her first entrance in the forest a year ago, and drank feverishly a second time at its trickling source. She could see that since her first visit it had worn a great hollow below the tree roots and now formed a shining, placid pool. As she stooped to look at it, she suddenly observed that it reflected her whole figure as in a cruel mirror, — her slouched hat and loosened hair, her coarse and shapeless gown, her hollow cheeks and dry yellow skin, — in all their hopeless, uncompromising details. She uttered a quick, angry, half-reproachful cry, and turned again to fly. But she had not gone far before she came upon the hurrying figures and anxious faces of the doctor and Hoskins. She stopped, trembling and irresolute.

"Ah," said the doctor, in a tone of frank relief. "Here you are! I was getting worried about you. Waya said you had been gone since morning!" He stopped and looked at her attentively. "Is anything the matter?"

His evident concern sent a warm glow over her chilly frame, and yet the strange sensation remained. "No — no!" she stammered.

Doctor Ruysdael turned to Hoskins. "Go back and tell Waya I 've found her."

Libby felt that the doctor only wanted to get rid of his companion, and became awed again.

"Has anybody been bothering you?"

"No."

"Have the diggers frightened you?"

"No" — with a gesture of contempt.

"Have you and Waya quarreled?"

"Nary" — with a faint, tremulous smile.

He still stared at her, and then dropped his blue eyes musingly. "Are you lonely here? Would you rather go to San José?"

Like a flash the figures of the two smartly dressed women started up before her again, with every detail of their fresh and wholesome finery as cruelly distinct as had been her own shapeless ugliness in the mirror or the spring. "No! *No!*" she broke out vehemently and passionately. "Never!"

He smiled gently. "Look here! I 'll send you up some books. You read — don't you?" She nodded quickly. "Some magazines and papers. Odd I never thought of it before," he added half musingly. "Come along to the cabin. And," he stopped again and said decisively, "the next time you want anything, don't wait for me to come, but write."

A few days after he left she received a package of books, — an odd collection of novels, magazines, and illustrated journals of the period. She received them eagerly as an evidence of his concern for her, but it is to be feared that her youthful nature found little satisfaction in the gratification of fancy. Many of the people she read of were strange to her; many of the incidents related seemed to her mere lies; some tales which treated of people in her own sphere she found profoundly uninteresting. In one of the cheaper magazines she chanced upon a fashion plate; she glanced eagerly through all the others for a like revelation until she got a dozen together, when she promptly relegated the remaining literature to a corner and oblivion. The text

accompanying the plates was in a jargon not always clear, but her instinct supplied the rest. She dispatched by Hoskins a note to Doctor Ruysdael: "Please send me some brite kalikers and things for sewing. You told me to ask." A few days later brought the response in a good-sized parcel.

Yet this did not keep her from her care of the stock nor her rambles in the forest; she was quick to utilize her rediscovery of the spring for watering the cattle; it was not so far afield as the half-dried creek in the cañon, and was a quiet, sylvan spot. She ate her frugal midday meal there and drank of its waters, and, secure in her seclusion, bathed there and made her rude toilet when the cows were driven home. But she did not again look into its mirrored surface when it was tranquil!

And so a month passed. But when Doctor Ruysdael was again due at the cabin, a letter was brought by Hoskins, with the news that he was called away on professional business down the coast, and could not come until two weeks later. In the disappointment that overcame her, she did not at first notice that Hoskins was gazing at her with a singular expression, which was really one of undisguised admiration. Never having seen this before in the eyes of any man who looked at her, she referred it to some vague "larking" or jocularity, for which she was in no mood.

"Say, Libby! you 're gettin' to be a right smart-lookin' gal. Seems to agree with ye up here," said Hoskins, with an awkward laugh. "Darned ef ye ain't lookin' awful purty!"

"G'long!" said Liberty Jones, more than ever convinced of his badinage.

"Fact," said Hoskins energetically. "Why, Doc would tell ye so, too. See ef he don't!"

At this Liberty Jones felt her face grow hot. "You jest get!" she said, turning away in as much embarrassment

as anger. Yet he hovered near her with awkward attentions that pleased while it still angered her. He offered to go with her to look up the cows; she flatly declined, yet with a strange satisfaction in his evident embarrassment. This may have lent some animation to her face, for he drew a long breath and said: —

"Don't go pertendin' ye don't know you're purty. Say, let me and you walk a bit and have a talk together." But Libby had another idea in her mind and curtly dismissed him. Then she ran swiftly to the spring, for the words "The Doc will tell ye so, too," were ringing in her ears. The doctor who came with the two beautifully dressed women! *he* — would tell her she was pretty! She had not dared to look at herself in that crystal mirror since that dreadful day two months ago. She would now.

It was a pretty place in the cool shade of the giant trees, and the hoof-marks of cattle drinking from the run beneath the pool had not disturbed the margin of that tranquil sylvan basin. For a moment she stood tremulous and uncertain, and then going up to the shining mirror, dropped on her knees before it with her thin red hands clasped on her lap. Unconsciously she had taken the attitude of prayer; perhaps there was something like it in her mind.

And then the light glanced full on the figure that she saw there!

It fell on a full oval face and throat guileless of fleck or stain, smooth as a child's and glowing with health; on large dark eyes, no longer sunk in their orbits, but filled with an eager, happy light; on bared arms now shapely in contour and cushioned with firm flesh; on a dazzling smile, the like of which had never been on the face of Liberty Jones before!

She rose to her feet, and yet lingered as if loath to part from this delightful vision. Then a fear overcame her that it was some trick of the water, and she sped swiftly back to

the house to consult the little mirror which hung in her sleeping-room, but which she had never glanced at since the momentous day of the spring. She took it shyly into the sunshine and found that it corroborated the reflection of the spring. That night she worked until late at the calico Doctor Ruysdael had sent her, and went to bed happy. The next day brought her Hoskins again with a feeble excuse of inquiring if she had a letter for the doctor, and she was surprised to find that he was reinforced by a stranger from Hoskins's farm, who was equally awkward and vaguely admiring. But the appearance of the two men produced a singular phase in her impressions and experience. She was no longer indignant at Hoskins, but she found relief in accepting the compliments of the stranger in preference, and felt a delight in Hoskins's discomfiture. Waya, promoted to the burlesque of a chaperon, grinned with infinite delight and understanding.

When at last the day came for the doctor's arrival, he was duly met by Hoskins, and as duly informed by that impressible subordinate of the great change in Liberty's appearance. But the doctor was far from being equally impressed with his factor's story, and indeed showed much more interest in the appearance of the stock which they met along the road. Once the doctor got out of the wagon to inspect a cow, and particularly the coat of a rough draught horse that had been turned out and put under Liberty's care. "His skin is like velvet," said the doctor. "The girl evidently understands stock, and knows how to keep them in condition."

"I reckon she 's beginning to understand herself, too," said Hoskins. "Golly! wait till ye see *her*."

The doctor *did* see her, but with what feelings he did not as frankly express. She was not at the cabin when they arrived, but presently appeared from the direction of the spring, where, for reasons of her own, she had evidently

made her toilet. Doctor Ruysdael was astounded; Hoskins's praise was not exaggerated; and there was an added charm that Hoskins was not prepared for. She had put on a gown of her own making, — the secret toil of many a long night, — amateurishly fashioned from some cheap yellow calico the doctor had sent her, yet fitting her wonderfully, and showing every curve of her graceful figure. Unaccented by a corset, — an article she had never known, — even the lines of the stiff, unyielding calico had a fashion that was nymph-like and suited her unfettered limbs. Doctor Ruysdael was profoundly moved. Though a philosopher, he was practical. He found himself suddenly confronted, not only by a beautiful girl, but a problem! It was impossible to keep the existence of this woodland nymph from the knowledge of his distant neighbors; it was equally impossible for him to assume the responsibility of keeping a goddess like this in her present position. He had noticed her previous improvement, but had never dreamed that pure and wholesome living could in two months work such a miracle. And he was to a certain degree responsible; *he* had created her, — a beautiful Frankenstein, whose lustrous, appealing eyes were even now menacing his security and position.

Perhaps she saw trouble and perplexity in the face where she had expected admiration and pleasure, for a slight chill went over her as he quickly praised the appearance of the stock and spoke of her own improvement. But when they were alone, he turned to her abruptly.

"You said you had no wish to go to San José?"

"No." Yet she was conscious that her greatest objection had been removed, and she colored faintly.

"Listen to me," he said dryly. "You deserve a better position than this, — a better home and surroundings than you have here. You are older, too, — a woman almost, — and you must look ahead."

A look of mingled fright, reproach, and appeal came into her eloquent face. "You 're wantin' to send me away?" she stammered.

"No," he said frankly. "It is you who are *growing* away. This is no longer the place for you."

"But I want to stay. I don't wanter go. I am — I *was* happy here."

"But I 'm thinking of giving up this place. It takes up too much of my time. You must be provided" —

"*You* are going away?" she said passionately.

"Yes."

"Take me with you. I 'll go anywhere! — to San José — wherever you go. Don't turn me off as dad did, for I 'll follow you as I never followed dad. I 'll go with you — or I 'll die!"

There was neither fear nor shame in her words; it was the outspoken instinct of the animal he had been rearing; he was convinced and appalled by it.

"I am returning to San José at once," he said gravely. "You shall go with me — *for the present!* Get yourself ready!"

He took her to San José, and temporarily to the house of a patient, — a widow lady, — while he tried, alone, to grapple with the problem that now confronted him. But that problem became more complicated at the end of the third day, by Liberty Jones falling suddenly and alarmingly ill. The symptoms were so grave that the doctor, in his anxiety, called in a brother physician in consultation. When the examination was over, the two men withdrew and stared at each other.

"Of course there is no doubt that the symptoms all point to slow arsenical poisoning," said the consulting doctor.

"Yes," said Ruysdael quickly, "yet it is utterly inexplicable, both as to motive and opportunity."

"Humph!" said the other grimly, "young ladies take arsenic in minute doses to improve the complexion and promote tissue, forgetting that the effects are cumulative when they stop suddenly. Your young friend has 'sworn off' too quickly."

"But it is impossible," said Doctor Ruysdael impatiently. "She is a mere child — a country girl — ignorant of such habits."

"Humph! the peasants in the Tyrol try it on themselves after noticing the effect on the coats of cattle."

Doctor Ruysdael started. A recollection of the sleek draught horse flashed upon him. He rose and hastily re-entered the patient's room. In a few moments he returned. "Do you think I could remove her at once to the mountains?" he said gravely.

"Yes, with care and a return to graduated doses of the same poison; you know it's the only remedy just now," answered the other.

By noon the next day the doctor and his patient had returned to the cabin, but Ruysdael himself carried the helpless Liberty Jones to the spring and deposited her gently beside it. "You may drink now," he said gravely.

The girl did so eagerly, apparently imbibing new strength from the sparkling water. The doctor meanwhile coolly filled a phial from the same source, and made a hasty test of the contents by the aid of some other phials from his case. The result seemed to satisfy him. Then he said gravely:

"And *this* is the spring you had discovered?"

The girl nodded.

"And you and the cattle have daily used it?"

She nodded again wonderingly. Then she caught his hand appealingly.

"You won't send me away?"

He smiled oddly as he glanced from the waters of the hill to the brimming eyes. "No."

"Now," tenderly, "go away — yourself?"

The doctor looked into one only into her eyes. There was a tremendous lie in his own which seemed in some way to have solved that dreadful problem.

"No! We will stay here *together*."

. . . . . .

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